

H.R.F. KEATING

The Underside



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BLOOMSBURY READER

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Chapter One

Godfrey Mann made a bet with himself as the hansom approached the tall brilliantly lit house in Brook Street. Midnight. If any one of the many marriageable girls to whom Lady Augusta would introduce him had by midnight said one thing that was fairly to be described as worthwhile, then he would stay on dutifully going through quadrille and waltz, cotillon and galop.

But if—a quiver of excitement caught him feather-light at the throat—if by midnight there had been only insipidities about the heat or, worse, hectic stupidities about the Season, then it would be such excuses as would come easily from a licensed eccentric like an artist and a stroll back home with a cigar through the Haymarket.

No more than that, he promised himself. No more than dip his wings swallow-like in the black water.

The hansom joined the tail of the line of carriages outside the house. Godfrey reached up and paid the driver and then, stepping out, made his way along towards the awning that stretched across the pavement and the broad lane of carpet under it leading to the wide open door. Light streamed out, clear and golden. Faintly from inside came the sound of music, elegant and bouncily rhythmic. His nostrils caught a hint of the scent from the big tubs of freely blossoming gardenias he could obliquely see in the marble-floored entrance hall.

Looking ahead, he failed to notice until he brushed against it a small form down beside the railings just outside the swathe of radiance from the open door. It was a gutter child, one of three or four crouching in the shadows, eyes wide fixed on the olympian comings and goings.

‘Gi’ us a ha’penny, sir,’ came at once the piping request.

Godfrey dug in his pocket, found a coin and tossed it to the child, boy or girl it was hard to tell from the shapeless

and tattered garment it wore.

He went up into the house. And on the stairs, standing in the slow-moving line of guests waiting to greet Lady Augusta and Sir Charles, he found that all his prognostications—and hopes—about what sort of talk he would hear were being fulfilled to the letter. The two girls just ahead of him, ignoring their solidly fat chaperone flicking steadily at herself with a broad lace fan, were exhaustively discussing the subject of ices. The ices at the dance they had been at earlier in the week had been the most wonderful they had ever eaten, the very newest thing, the peak of the confectioner's art. Would they, or would they not, find them again when they got to the tea-room?

Well, there were two who were not going to lose him his wager.

Nor would any of the three somewhat older girls who had now arrived with their mother on the stairs immediately below him. He had a feeling he knew who the mother was. A Mrs General MacSomething. No doubt any of her daughters would be considered a respectable match for a young man of twenty-four with an income of his own, even if he did choose to spend his time painting pictures. And no doubt, for all their giggling and nudging over the tall cavalry officer with that extraordinary bush of moustache just at the turn of the stairway above them, they would when it came to it fall quietly in with the wishes of Mrs General MacWhatever and secure themselves a solid footing on the social ladder. Unless any of them were, as was equally possible, to run off in a sweet-toothed swirl of romantic love with some such blackguard as that cavalryman.

Across the turn of the stairway another fragment of conversation came to his ears. A desiccated-looking woman in totally unbecoming eau-de-Nil, who had been a connection of his mother's, a Lady Emmeline Otway, was

talking to a plump companion in canary-yellow silk trimmed with black velvet.

‘Yes, Lady Augusta always chooses them to match. Such taste. Always so right.’

Godfrey glanced round, wondering what Lady Augusta, whom he was half-inclined to respect but of whose taste he had no particularly high opinion, chose always with such care. Was it the chandeliers that swung above, loaded as could be with sparkling faceted slips of glass? No, there was not even a pair of them. The carpets? What he remembered of the carpets here was thickness and richness of colour but no especial art in the matching.

Lady Emmeline, when her father had died, so the family story went, had gone through his library separating male from female authors. Of what would she approve? Matching Brussels lace trouserlettes for the legs of the pianos? No, Lady Augusta was never that sort of fool.

‘My dear,’ the woman in the canary-yellow was saying now, ‘I have tried with my own two. But when I got the calves to agree the heights were always wrong. So I got two of a height and made the spindly one wear padding. But he complained that a street boy stuck a pin in him because he looked false and gave notice.’

Lady Emmeline could be heard to hiss shock at the risqué turn the conversation had taken. But her plump acquaintance prattled happily on.

‘And Lady Augusta has six—my dear, I’ve counted—six footmen all alike as statues’.

Godfrey sighed. The two girls in front of him had progressed from comparing the merits of ices to comparing the merits of bands. At Lady Melchester’s the band had kept abominably bad time. What was the use of music if it were not in perfect time?

Tonight. In the Haymarket. The passing of the doxies. Their hard feckless faces, painted doors promising to open

at a touch and lead swiftly down.

No, whatever happened, he would slip away before midnight. Only to see that world of theirs.

And then he was bowing over Lady Augusta's plump, wrinkled, much ringed hand.

'Well, Godfrey, so we are to be honoured tonight?'

'Your wish is my command,' Godfrey answered, wondering as he often had in the past just how much of the sarcastic there was in Lady Augusta.

'But I hear that you yourself have been honoured by the Queen,' she went on. 'Your picture in the Academy bought. It cannot often happen that an artist begins so happily.'

'I was indeed honoured.' Godfrey replied.

'And well recompensed, I hope.'

'Her Majesty gave six hundred pounds for it,' Godfrey said.

'Six hundred pounds? Then we can no longer think of you as a mere amateur.'

'I had hoped that you would not. Painting is my whole life.'

'That we certainly knew. It has kept you out of Society so much. This must be the first entertainment you have come to here in the year you have been back from your travels.'

'I am afraid it is.'

'Well, now that we have you I shall make you earn your keep on the dance floor.'

'I shall be only too delighted,' Godfrey said, bowing his departure.

But Lady Augusta laid a plump shiny-skinned hand on his arm.

'No, before you go,' she said. 'There is one girl that I shall insist that you dance with.'

Godfrey steeled himself. Why should there be here one girl who could be singled out for him to dance with? Who, if

he knew anything of Lady Augusta, would be someone he could talk with, someone she had seen even as a suitable match for him?

'I shall, of course, be happy to dance with any lady you introduce me to,' he said.

'She is a niece of mine, or rather of my husband's,' Lady Augusta explained.

'I did not know you had a niece. Is she very young?'

'No. She must be much your own age.'

Godfrey felt a new interior qualm.

'But she has been in America,' Lady Augusta went on. 'And indeed she has done there things quite as extraordinary as anything in that extraordinary country.'

Godfrey raised an eyebrow in mild acknowledgement of the extraordinariness of America. He felt the onset of a sharp depression.

'Yes,' Lady Augusta added. 'Or I might have said she has done things as extraordinary as the things you yourself have done.'

'Lady Augusta.'

He pretended to a tone of shocked reproof.

'Well, I will tell you,' his hostess said. 'She has become a doctor.'

'A doctor? A woman? But—'

'Yes, you may well express bewilderment. But in America all things are possible. Or so they tell me. And Elizabeth has qualified as a doctor.'

'I shall be most interested to meet her,' Godfrey said, and realised that he had meant it.

'You shall.'

Again he bowed farewell and the solid stream on the staircase was able to move forward once more.

He went, as Lady Augusta had wanted him to, into the ballroom and had little difficulty in finding partners since

any large entertainment of Lady Augusta's could not but include numbers of family friends of his. And, as he had foreseen, not one of them had anything worthwhile to say. They varied from the youngest, who were almost entirely speechless, to the oldest, who talked without stop and said nothing. But they were all of them of the same mould: the iron-edged mould of Society that decreed what they should think and what they should think of themselves at each stage upwards in the path it laid out for them.

But they troubled him less than they might have done. He had Lady Augusta's newly-risen niece to think about. And she was matter for thought indeed. A young woman of much his own age and yet—unheard of—a doctor. Or, to be accurate, not quite unheard of. There was, surely, that Mrs Garrett Anderson, who had slipped through some loophole in the law to qualify as a medical practitioner. But all the same for a woman to seek to adopt that profession ...

But was he allowing prejudice to hobble him? Perhaps he had been.

He smiled at his proneness to fall into the trap that he had in his own person so often been the victim of.

'A penny for that thought, Mr Mann,' said his partner of the moment, one of the older ones who had been prevented from chattering ceaselessly only because they had been dancing a more than usually strenuous waltz.

'Forgive me,' Godfrey said. 'I was thinking of another young lady.'

'That I shall find hard to forgive, unless I am to learn her name.'

'Ah, but I don't wholly know it.'

'Worse and worse. You have glimpsed her riding in the Park and have been irretrievably smitten?'

'No, I have never seen her. And I never go to the Park.'

'Yes, I know of your bearishness, you horrid creature, and, if it were not that I am so intrigued by this mysterious fair

one, you would hear more from me on that.'

'She may not even be fair,' Godfrey said. 'In fact, I rather suspect she cannot be.'

'But who is this? You are to tell me at once.'

'I will. She is a niece of Sir Charles's and—'

'Ah, you need say no more. I know well whom you mean. Miss Elizabeth Hills. Or am I to say—but it sounds so altogether ridiculous—Dr Elizabeth Hills? Or Miss Doctor?'

'Whatever title she is to have, you have found the lady.'

'She was easy enough to find. All the gentlemen can talk of no one else since she came to London.'

'And you? You know her?'

'I have seen her. And I will have to admit that you do her an injustice in supposing her not fair.'

'Indeed?'

'But I can happily report that she does speak with a distinct Yankee intonation.'

'Which, as she comes from America, is not altogether surprising.'

'I see you are to be one of the gentlemen that defend her.'

Well, Godfrey reflected, it would seem that he was to be. The more he thought about what she had done, and the more such prattles as his present partner talked against her, the more he began to see that she might be quite a remarkable person. The blood, the bile, the bowels, all that was in the human body: to understand them and to know what to do for some at least of their ills. Yes, remarkable.

Happily the waltz came to an end before he had had more openly to espouse the cause of Miss or Dr Hills. He bowed to the prattler and slipped his watch from his waistcoat pocket. Already half-past eleven. Was he going to reach his midnight appointment with himself without having met the girl who was bound to settle the wager in favour of remaining till

dawn in the world of politeness? And did he, in fact, now really want that to be the way of it?

‘Ah, Godfrey, there you are. I was beginning to think you had been ungracious enough to leave already.’

It was Lady Augusta. Godfrey turned.

And at once he knew that the girl at Lady Augusta’s side must be the American doctor. She was certainly to be granted the description ‘fair’, he conceded. She was of medium height with a generous womanly figure, wearing a somewhat plain dress in a grey watered silk with a little white lace on the full bodice that seemed particularly to suit her. But it was not this that made her someone bound to attract attention. It was not even, he thought, particularly the fullish regularly featured face in its frame of smooth dark hair. It was her eyes. They were large and grey and they shone with a light that was not the sparkle of excitement but a steady pouring-out of luminosity that seemed to bathe everything they looked at in a radiance at once calming and softly penetrating.

She made you feel she saw you, completely and steadily. And the effect was exhilarating.

Lady Augusta introduced him.

‘And you are to dance,’ she said. ‘You are both altogether too serious, too set on high things. We have a duty to amuse ourselves as well, let me tell you.’

So they danced. And, as the dance was a cotillon, there was no opportunity at first to talk. But as soon as the music ceased Godfrey suggested an ice and they went down to the tea-room. The ices—were these that latest thing in the art, Godfrey wondered—took more than a little getting in the crush, but eventually he and this wonder from America were seated on each side of a little table by a pair of open french windows looking out at the dark garden of the big house.

‘So you come to us from across the Atlantic?’ Godfrey said.

She smiled, the luminous grey eyes darkening with a flicker of amusement.

‘You mean to say “So you are a doctor?”, I think.’

‘I—I hesitated to broach the subject. To be altogether frank, I am not sure of my feelings on it.’

‘Then you are a singularly unusual person.’

Godfrey felt himself suppressing a blush.

‘You do me too much credit,’ he said hastily. ‘I will confess that when I talked of you to my partner in the waltz not long ago she placed me at once in the camp of your committed defenders.’

‘But you are not one of them?’

‘It is that I must really take time to consider just what it is you have done,’ Godfrey replied.

‘Then it’s as I thought. You are unusual. Most people, you know, condemn me out of hand. And even those who champion me, I sometimes think do so from motives that are little credit to them.’

Godfrey felt yet more at a loss in front of this directness.

‘In one thing at least you have certainly been calumniated in my hearing,’ he said, by way of temporising. ‘You have not very much of the American in your voice.’

‘That’s scarcely surprising. My parents went there only just before I was born. They spoke the English of England.’

‘And they are cousins of Sir Charles?’

‘They were. My mother died some four years ago, and my father, who was older, last January.’

‘I am sorry to hear it. But was it—was it perhaps your mother’s early death that gave you the idea of studying medicine?’

‘That is perceptive of you, Mr Mann. Yes, it was. My poor mother. She suffered much, and, I believe, did not seek treatment as soon as she ought to have done because of an

altogether irrational dislike, or fear, of medical examination, particularly at the hands of a man.'

'I begin to make up my mind on the vexed question of the propriety of Miss Hills' vocation,' Godfrey said.

And then he had the greatest of difficulty in not smiling once more at his own thoughts, because the clock at the far end of the long tea-room began at that moment to strike midnight.

For perhaps a quarter of an hour more they continued to talk, with Elizabeth sketching out for him the course of her career which had begun at a medical college for women then recently founded in New York.

Did she mean to practise medicine here? he asked. No, that was impossible. Foreign qualifiers had been specifically excluded from practising in Britain by an Act of 1858. Yet she intended to stay. She had no family in America, and Sir Charles and Lady Augusta were being very kind 'for all that they cannot bring themselves even to think about my studies, much less approve of them'.

So she would regard them only as having been a beneficial education? She bridled quickly at this, a little bright colour showing itself on her full face. No, she had not gone through all that she had—and it had not been easy, and it had not always been pleasant—for it to be let to go to waste 'like the Latin that a gentleman must have learnt, once'.

Then Sir Charles came up, slight of figure, with scanty hair well brushed across his head, always smiling. It appeared that Elizabeth, at the orders no doubt of Lady Augusta, was to be introduced to other young men. And was to dance with them.

Godfrey, having made his bow, turned and looked down the length of the tea-room at the ornate clock standing on the far mantelpiece. He could just make it out as reading twenty minutes past twelve.

‘Sir Charles,’ he said, ‘I am going to excuse myself, early though it is. A painter depends on the light and I should be at my easel in good time tomorrow. So good-night and thank you.’

Chapter Two

With steps that he could not prevent getting faster at every stride, Godfrey walked through Hanover Square and into Regent Street. There he pulled his cigar-case from his pocket. But at once he thrust it away again without opening it. This was not the contemplative stroll he had falsely promised himself.

Faster and faster he hurried past the blankly shuttered shops of what was so often described as 'the most fashionable street in the world'. The delicate and costly objects in the fancy watchmaker's would have been so many pebbles to him now had everything behind its shutters been showered on him at once. Past luxurious haberdashers and hosiers, past the 'Fancy Stationer' and the 'Fancy Staymaker'. Past the new photographers' shops, past the music shops, the shawl shops, the French glove shops. Past perfumery and point-lace, past milliners, jewellers and confectioners. And then at last he was in Regent Circus and in a minute had turned into the Haymarket.

Its garish length lay open before him. Under the strong gas lights the pavements were, even at this hour, as crowded as midday. Men, almost all smoking, their tall black hats rakishly set catching the light, strolled back and forth, giving off even at a distance an air of swaggering excitement. And the women —Paphians from first to last, he thought—were in their different ways as brazen. In flashing satins and silks, with faces white-washed or painted, the most obtrusive of them flaunted their way through the very thick of the throng. At the mouths of the side-streets others, less gaudy, lurked, dimly seen shapes in light-coloured gowns, pale-faced, often bonnetless or with a few bright and broken artificial flowers in their hats. And, at a yet lower level, dodging in and out of the strollers there were the

young ones, creatures whom Godfrey succeeded in not letting his thoughts dwell on, girls of twelve and thirteen, generally dressed in horribly inappropriate cast-offs far too big for them, begging half the time, half the time importuning.

Occasional loud laughter floated up and talk noisy as if the speaker were in a dense-packed gin-palace. Drawn to it all, Godfrey plunged in, subduing his pace to the easy stroll of those around him. He felt excitement running up and down arms and legs. But, he told himself, there would be no more than that. The curious joy that came over him merely to bathe in this atmosphere was, he said to himself, all that he wanted. And besides, an artist had a duty not to spend his powers in dissipation.

Added to which, he admitted with a wry smile, he was a little afraid. Afraid not only of disease, but of any commerce at all, even of conversation, with these beings from, as it were, another world, a Hades with customs quite different from those of this earth.

At his smile a voice spoke close beside him in the mingled brilliance and dark shadow of the harshly gaslit street. 'You look good-natured, dear. D'you want to come with me then?' Without turning to look, he shook his head in brief negative. A little to his relief, the woman—she had sounded as if she were forty at least—paid him no further attention.

But he continued to move slowly through the crowd, drinking in the scene almost like a horse watering, breathing deeply, letting its essence invade him. He glimpsed through the open doors of the Grand Turkish Divan men lolling on sofas with the silk-brilliant women leaning intimately over them. His ears caught a pearl-thread of laughter. He went through the peristyle of the theatre where the press was even thicker and where the harlots' soft signalling kissing-sounds seemed to float in the air everywhere like butterflies.

Turning to stroll back up, he saw ahead of him an ancient shapeless bent-backed creature, tattered and greasy rags dropping from her, hopping and hobbling along beside a tall girl in a cream-coloured cotton gown with a wide straw hat whom he had noticed earlier. Cacklingly the crone was demanding money and the girl was attempting to walk away. At this moment a tall man with an eye-glass, apparently attracted, veered across the pavement. The old woman at once scrambled her way round so that she was progressing backwards in front of the young whore and between her and her prospective catch. In an instant the girl's hand dipped into her pocket and Godfrey caught the tiny silver flash of a coin passing. The old gin-sodden creature backed quickly away and the whore exchanged a few words with the tall man who turned and walked beside her.

Godfrey followed them as if drawn by a fine unbreakable thread. And it was all too possible, he thought, that the life-full straight-backed swaying girl ahead would come in the end to practise the same act of petty blackmail that she had just been victim of. Then the harlot as she turned into Panton Street put back her head and laughed aloud at something her companion had said to her. And there was in that peeling sound, Godfrey could not but register, only joy.

He stood at the corner watching them, and, as he had expected, before long they went in at the door of an accommodation house. He turned away and once more floated with the idling darting-eyed crowd, drifting eventually into one of the cafés in Coventry Street to take a cup of coffee. In the foyer there was a small shining mahogany counter with displayed on shelves behind it knick-knacks of various sorts evidently designed as trifling gifts. A big-bosomed woman in a black silk dress with harsh high-piled golden hair was there to serve.

'Lovely night, dearie,' she said to him.

‘Yes. Yes, it is. A fine night.’

‘But hot. Lord, ain’t it hot? Enough to put a girl all in a sweat only sitting here.’

She laughed. And into Godfrey’s mind came a picture of her body, big-breasted, wide-hipped, milkily white, and covered in a light sheen of sweat.

‘It is hot,’ he said.

‘Well,’ the vendeuse returned, ‘there’s only one thing to do, they say, when you’re as hot as this.’

‘Oh, yes?’

Godfrey began to think of a retreat.

‘To get hotter, dear. Get yourself some nice little creature and forget whether it’s hot or cold, rain or shine. That’s what they say.’

‘Yes, yes. I suppose it is.’

The vendeuse laughed again, richly and coarsely. Godfrey smiled.

‘I’ll tell you what you want to do, dearie. You want to buy one of these trifles here. Make a lovely present for a girl, they do. Why, you’ll only have to step out into the street and they’ll be round you like bees round a honey-pot. Nice looking chap like you.’

For a moment, an absurd moment, Godfrey thought of buying something—one of those glove-cases—and making it a present. To Elizabeth Hills.

‘No, No, thank you. Good evening.’

He stepped quickly out into the night again and made his way wandersomely on past coffee-shops with their plain little notices saying ‘Beds To Be Had Within’, past wine-vaults, past oyster-rooms bright with scarlet lobsters and crabs on their stone slabs, with pickled salmon on beds of green fennel, with yellow finnan haddocks, with the tubs of oysters on their walls and their busy flannel-aproned assistants.

Eventually he turned into the little dark lanes north of Coventry Street.

Somewhere here at one moment in the quietness something just down a narrow unlit way—half a faintly moving figure, half a sound—arrested his attention. He stopped and peered into the dark, and then discovered it was two doxies, one standing keeping watch, the other squatting to urinate. He hurried away. Yet the glimpsed tableau, hard though he tried to thrust it from his mind, refused to leave him, dwelling there like a soft persistent ghost.

Indeed, when outside a discreetly-lit house in Tichbourne Street opposite the darkened shape of Kahn's Anatomy Museum a lurking individual in a very skimpy frock-coat with a stovepipe hat broken at the brim murmured to him as he passed, 'The poses plastiques inside, sir, you're very welcome to step in', he almost did so, if only to dispel with cruder flavours the lingering ghost-taste. But he was too quick with himself. He jerked out his habitual 'No. No thank you' and turned sharply back towards the lights of Coventry Street.

And it was there that the mulatto woman made a set against him.

She was a tall well-built creature, in her thirties as well as he could judge thinking of it afterwards, and she wore a somewhat tattered but gaudily bright dress of crimson satin with neither mantle nor bonnet. She had come up as he had re-entered Coventry Street, and, as she had seemed quite indisposed to alter her course, walking straight towards him with her big eyes rolling whitely in her thick-lipped bronze face, he had at almost the last moment stepped sharply aside himself.

It was this abrupt movement that seemed to draw her particular attention to him.

‘What you wanna step away from me fo’?’ she demanded in a loud free tone.

Godfrey ignored it. But the mulatto swung back and presented herself directly in front of him.

‘What fo’ you do that?’ she demanded again. ‘You ‘fraid of a woman like me? You don’t wanna have it ‘cept with a girl white as snow, is it?’

Godfrey thought afterwards that things might have been different if he had attempted some jocular answer. But instead he tried to dodge past the burly creature. And this she was not having. She put out both her large bronze hands and gripped him by the elbows.

‘Let me go,’ he said with sudden heat.

‘I ain’t gonna let you go, darlin’. You’re gonna come along wi’ me. You’re gonna have me if it’s the las’ blessed thing you do.’

With a sharp tug Godfrey freed himself, and, without consideration of dignity, lunged round and ran. It was not easy however to make any fast progress through the sauntering night crowd. And the big mulatto woman seemed able to run every bit as fast as he, making wild grabs from time to time at his coat-tails and yelling after him a stream of abusive and obscene epithets.

Once, when a pair of drooping-mustachioed passers-by playfully attempted to detain his pursuer, he did begin to draw away. But at that moment his hat, which had been gradually slipping forward down his sweaty forehead, tipped right off. He stooped to retrieve it and the mulatto broke free of the two playful gentlemen and with a great cry of ‘I’ll get you between my legs yet, you bugger’—a cry which turned heads for yards all round—she lunged forward once more.

This is ridiculous, Godfrey thought, dodging and slipping his way through the crowd.

He determined to put a quick end to the farce. There was a turning on his left and he decided to take it and, where the press of people would be less, really make good speed.

And it seemed that his plan was going to succeed. The narrow street he had dodged into was entirely empty, though dark. He took a great gulp of warm night air and began to stride out as he had not done since running races at school.

Behind him, already more distant, he heard a shriek of frustrated rage from the mulatto. He pounded onwards. And then he put a foot on some slimy thing on the dark cobbles and crashed heavily to the ground, leaving himself hopelessly winded and shocked almost to fainting.

How long he would have lain there he did not know, nor whether the mulatto would have come up and claimed her prey at last. But in half a minute or less he heard a soft voice, with a noticeable Irish accent to it, saying something about was he badly hurt. And then he felt hands taking his head and raising it up a little.

'No, no,' he managed to reply. 'I do not think I am much hurt.'

'Ah, but you came a terrible cropper,' the Irish girl said. 'I was after having a piddle just further along and I saw it plain.'

By now he was on his knees, feeling the squelchy rubbish in the gutter soaking into his trousers. He looked up at the girl, the Irish doxy to judge from her coarse speech. In the dark he could see little beyond a dress of some light-coloured stuff, dark straight hair beneath a pale bonnet and a white blur of a face.

He pushed himself to his feet, took a deep breath and felt somewhat better.

'Thank you', he said. 'It was most kind.'

The girl stooped quickly, picked up his hat from where it had rolled away, brushed it against the arm of her dress and

held it out to him.

‘You’re a gent,’ she said. ‘D’you want to be kind to a girl?’

‘Of course, of course,’ Godfrey said, in his still confused state mistaking her meaning and pulling out his gold-purse.

‘No, dear, put that away,’ the girl said in her soft Irish voice. ‘You can keep it till after.’

‘But—But—’

‘You come along with me. We’ll go to a nice house. I’ll give you a good time.’

Godfrey found himself enmeshed suddenly in a web of cold reluctance. He felt in a turmoil still from his encounter with the mulatto. He had as a fixed principle a determination not to risk disease in this way. He had all his unexamined fears of any actual contact with the denizens of the dark world, for all that it fascinated him. And yet that fascination was powerful.

‘Come on now,’ the soft voice cajoled. ‘Are you timid?’

‘No, no. It’s not that.’

‘Sure, it isn’t. But what is it then? We could have a nice bit of supper. You could send out.’

Godfrey, condemning himself as weak, seized on this. After all, he reflected, he had wanted refreshment when he had entered the café and had been deterred by the importunities of the vendeuse. He had had only an ice at Lady Augusta’s. After such a shaking he ought to take something reviving. And then afterwards he could give the girl some money and bid her goodnight. There need be no hard feelings. A man was entitled to do as he pleased.

‘Yes, yes. Good. I’ll come.’

‘There’s a good house only a step round the corner.’

Bemused, and yet with a feeling of holy daring, Godfrey followed his rescuer. In two minutes he found himself standing beside her as she knocked on the door of a modest-looking house.

A stoutish neat enough woman opened to them.

'Ah, it's you Lisa,' she said as the light from the hallway spread across the narrow pavement.

'You've a room free?' asked the girl called Lisa.

'Yes, yes. The second floor front.'

She turned to Godfrey.

'It's a good room, sir,' she said. 'You'll find everything to your liking.'

She lowered her voice.

'It's thirty shillings.'

'Yes, yes. That's all right.'

Godfrey followed Lisa up a carpeted staircase with the plump landlady bringing up the rear. He wondered whether, had she not been behind him, he would not have turned and run out into the street again. On the second floor Lisa opened a door and went ahead of him into the room.

He entered and looked about. There was a Turkey carpet, and long curtains at the windows. A decent armchair stood near the empty fireplace, in which someone had placed a paper decoration. Two other chairs stood against a wall on either side of a three-legged table covered with a dark-green cloth. In a corner there was a wash-stand with a towel laid neatly across the jug on it. The wide brass bedstead was covered with a white lacework counterpane.

Godfrey turned quickly to the landlady.

'Would it be possible to get some supper?' he said.

'Anything you like, sir. Anything you like. I can send out for anything.'

Seeing Godfrey hesitate, she stepped in rapidly.

'Champagne, sir, of course. And to go with it, how about a nice lobster?'

'Yes, yes,' Godfrey said. 'That will be excellent.'

Then he recollected himself and turned, with a little embarrassment, to the girl, Lisa.

‘That is—That is, my dear, if it suits you?’

‘I like lobster fine,’ she answered.

And then the landlady withdrew, closing the door with care behind her. Godfrey stood and looked more closely at his companion under the light of the gas-chandelier. She was, as he had already seen, dark-haired and pale of face. But he saw now that, while by no means coarse, she was really not at all pretty. Not only was her complexion too wan, but her nose, sharp as a blade, had a pronounced hooked bend to it, as if at some past time it might have been broken. The mouth too was small and crooked. Indeed, she would have been downright ugly if it had not been for her expression that, in the quick yet not hasty flicker here and there of the eyes and the poised-to-dart mobility of the crooked mouth, conveyed a vivacity and even intelligence more than ordinary.

If he was looking at her, she was equally regarding him.

‘Why, your coat is all messed, and your trousers too,’ she said. ‘Here, I’ll brush them.’

And immediately she dropped to her knees and began to flick with taut-stretched fingers at the filth on the trousers. Her treatment was effective too.

‘But you’re getting it all over your hands,’ Godfrey said.

‘Ah, isn’t it dirt only? Where’s the harm in that? I’ve touched enough of it in my time.’

In a few moments more she had finished, and Godfrey, glancing down at his knees, saw that the trousers were in an almost tolerable state.

‘Thank you, thank you, it’s very good of you,’ he said stammeringly.

‘Take off your coat now,’ Lisa replied.

After a fractional hesitation Godfrey did so. For a moment he wondered what he would do when they brought in the supper. And then he thought, with a smile at his own naivety, that this was no place for scruples of that sort.

He began to feel more at ease, and watched Lisa happily as she tackled the stains and smears on his coat in the same quick manner as she had dealt with the trousers.

‘How is it that you come to be what you are?’ he asked, almost without realising that he had spoken.

‘A whore?’

The quick eyes looked at him with, he thought, a flick of scorn for his circumlocution.

‘Yes. That.’

‘And why wouldn’t I be? Doesn’t it keep me well enough? Better than if I was a servant girl.’

‘But—’ Godfrey said. ‘But, well, how did you come to it in the first place?’

‘How did I come to fall, you’d like to say,’ Lisa answered, a smile half of malice, half of genuine amusement turning up the corner of her crookedy mouth. ‘Ah, it was no fall at all. Down in Southwark where me mother and father lived when they came from Ireland, it was one room for all of us and childer in plenty. You soon learnt what goes on between a man and a woman. Or boy and girl, I ought to say.’

‘I suppose so,’ Godfrey said. ‘A terrible life certainly.’

‘A bad life when we were hungry and cold, and ill too often enough. But not such a terrible life. You learnt quick to enjoy yourself when you could. And making love was the easiest way of doing that. Cheaper than gin, and better generally.’

‘I see.’

Godfrey had never before thought of the reasons behind the life that he had occasionally gone fascinatedly to watch, diving down some dark covered passage too narrow for two people to pass in it and coming into the courts and yards behind the rows of outwardly respectable shops in the roads the traffic went along. But he saw now indeed.

‘So that was the way of it,’ Lisa went on, unconcernedly pouring water into the basin and washing her fingers. ‘What

you'd learnt as girls and boys all in the same bed together you found would bring you money. Maybe at first it was only to get into the gardens at Cremorne or to a masked ball. But they were a taste of life, and soon you learnt how to pick up a flat that'd pay better than that.'

'Yes,' said Godfrey, thinking that he now was 'a flat' and indeed had been to a few masked balls. But before he had had time to ask himself what he felt about that there came a thumping knock on the door and a small untidy girl of thirteen or fourteen entered with a large tray.

'That'll be a guinea for the champagne and half a guinea for the lobsters,' she said as she banged her burden down on the table.

Godfrey suspected that he was being charged more than he ought to be. But he nevertheless took out his purse.

The girl left, bobbing at him for the sixpence he had given her for herself. Lisa bolted the door behind her.

For an instant Godfrey flushed and almost demanded that she should draw the bolt back again. But he reflected that he could easily enough get out when the time came and said nothing.

They ate sitting opposite each other at the little table. Godfrey began by being ravenously hungry and then abruptly could stomach no more. He drank more than his share of the champagne. He tried as well to find indifferent matters to talk about, the heat, the appointments of the room. Why, he reflected sharply, in a moment I shall be asking her if she knows of the latest ices.

And then he could keep it up no longer.

'But don't you detest it, all the different men? Aren't they sometimes brutal?' he burst out.

Lisa gave him her crooked quizzical smile.

'You take your luck,' she said. 'And you soon enough learn how to deal with the ones who want to hurt you. Besides,

there's good and bad in everything. And there's plenty good in this.'

'Good?' he exclaimed with involuntary heat.

'Good, of course,' Lisa said. 'Wait till I show you.'

And in an instant she had leapt up and was pirouetting round the room, swaying her somewhat thin body and looking back at him with a sharp mocking sensuality.

Then, as suddenly, she had flung herself down backwards on the edge of the bed, kicked her legs wide, tossed up the skirt of her dress and her chemise, revealing that she wore no drawers, and was displaying to Godfrey a sight he had in fact seen only once before and that in a single confused glimpse.

He stood up, but did not move from the table.

'Come on, come on,' Lisa said.

She held out her arms.

'Give us a kiss.'

This was the time to go, Godfrey thought. But, no, it was not. That time had passed. He had meant to leave, when their supper was quite completed, with a polite word of regret. He could not leave now: it would be a cowardice.

And besides he was inflamed for the strumpet lying in front of him.

With unsteady strides, as if he was walking the deck of a ship, he crossed towards her. For a moment he stood in front of her, looking down at the dark triangle of hair and the wide-spread pink parting inside it. When, at seventeen, he had had that sudden summer tumble in his bedroom at home with the maid, Hannah, there had been nothing like this. It had been a clumsy embrace, a falling to the floor, two sets of hands groping, not really knowing what they were about, and then the near-furtive actual business, never afterwards repeated, never again referred to by either of the participants. Then, he had seen little enough. Now, all there was to see was being paraded under his eyes.

He almost fell on top of her, his mouth dabblingly seeking hers. And at once he felt her tongue, sharp and hard as a spoon, probing between his lips. And then her fingers were working at his trousers and after a few moments' wrestling both trousers and under-trousers were sliding down towards his ankles.

And then, to his immense and immediate shame, he uncontrollably ejaculated.

He lay for a little heavily on her, rapidly subsiding into quiescence.

'I—I'm sorry,' he muttered.

'What've you got to be sorry about? Sure, to spend as quick as that, it's a kind of compliment to a girl.'

'But—But I ought to have ...'

'There's time enough. I'm not one of your double-journey double-pay girls. You stay as long as you like. The room's yours.'

He pushed himself upright and stood, a sorry figure in his own eyes, with trousers and under-trousers in a hopeless tangle at his feet.

'And you,' he said 'You've got it all over you.'

At this she burst into frank laughter.

'Dear God,' she spluttered, 'is it worse to have it on me belly than to have it in me quim?'

And the very openness of her laughter conquered him in spite of himself.

'I suppose it's not,' he said. 'I suppose it's not. You must pardon me. To tell you the truth, I'm not very experienced in these matters.'

'You'd no need to tell me that,' she answered.

But her smile as she said it, coaxing and friendly, robbed the words of any sting.

Then she swung herself fully up on to the bed and rolled across the lacy counterpane to its far side.

‘Now you take all those blessed trousers off,’ she said.
‘Take off that waistcoat and that shirt and that funny white tie with it. And I’ll pull off me dress and me shimmy and then you come here beside me. And we’ll begin.’

Chapter Three

It was not until past four in the morning that Godfrey left Lisa and set out to walk through Leicester Square and along the Strand to the studio he had found a year before on the riverside at Gillingham Place by Blackfriars Bridge. Though the sun was up, the streets that had been so thickly warm the night before were cool now. He buttoned his coat—he had taken no paletot the night before, setting out for Lady Augusta's —and struck out at a good pace.

He found himself experiencing an unexpected sensation of total well-being. And, though he felt that he ought not to let his thoughts dwell on the night he had just spent, he could not help letting them do so.

His original nervous fears and that schoolboyish débâcle he dismissed. It was their later—what to call them? their criminal conversation? their amours?—it was their secret couplings that rose up in his imagination. Each time they had at last come together it had seemed to him that unimagined doors were breaking open. Lisa's fingers, thin and hard, had prowled over his body, setting up in the deepest recesses of his mind feelings and emotions that he could recall only as thunderous bursts of rare colours. And he in his turn had learnt little by little to explore her, and had experienced a fierce and heart-beating pride when he had realised that he was stirring her as she stirred him.

But now abruptly in the dawn he asked himself if Lisa had been play-acting. Could it be? Did they not say that all whores were dead to passion, mere machines? Were they? If they were, then would it be to the wives, the ladies whom he had never been able to picture to himself unclothed, that true unfeigned passionate excitement came? To some wives at least? It was not easy to imagine.

Across his path when he reached the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields a procession of waggons bound for the market

at Covent Garden slowly lumbered loaded with carefully heaped dark-green cabbages, pale-green peas in nets, feathery piles of freshly pulled carrots, immense mounds of globular white turnips. From a light spring-van bringing up the rear he caught a delicious whiff of strawberries, picked no doubt scarcely an hour earlier.

Suddenly anger scoured through him. The world ought to be innocent, he thought. There ought to be simplicity and pure goodness everywhere.

He looked down at his coat and trousers. The mire they had picked up in his fall had not been, he saw now, entirely removed by Lisa's ministrations. He was disgusting, smirched with foulness. He held his hands up in front of his face. There had been no soap on the wash-stand there. Of course, there would not have been.

But this would be the only time in his life, he vowed. It would be blotted from the book as effacingly as that other more hasty, less horribly knowing incident with Hannah the maid had been. It would be as if the night past had never existed.

He must lift himself away from the mire. He would set off on another course. He would somehow direct these feelings into better channels. Yes, that was it. Miss Hills. Elizabeth. There was a person who could be his equal. He had admitted that to himself last night, before the madness had gripped him. And that too was something he would never succumb to again. Never. Deliberately to go staring and lip-licking over the lewd and disgusting. It was unworthy of a man. It was, above all, unworthy of an artist, a being who should strive in everything for purity, for true beauty.

Tomorrow he would call on Lady Augusta. He had left the ball early: he owed her an apology. And he would hope to meet Elizabeth. Miss Hills.

He was round at Brook Street at eleven. He had taken a bath as soon as he had got back to his studio, in cold water, bringing up the pails himself from the tap in the yard, taking precautions not to wake the boy he kept to run errands and clean his brushes, clumsy drinking-eyed Billy, fast asleep in his truckle-bed in the low-ceilinged basement kitchen. And in the tub, lifted with care into its place instead of being reverberatingly dragged there, he had scrubbed and scrubbed at his flesh with a hard brush, accepting with grim pleasure the rawness and the cold. And then he had plunged into his bed—rightly narrow—and had forced himself into sleep.

But he had risen in good time to make a careful toilet before setting out. Not today the shirt worn with collar unbuttoned, the flowing loosely-knotted necktie, the velveteen jacket. Instead he shaved with the greatest care, standing before the somewhat spotted mirror in his bedroom and cursing the poorness of the light that came through the single small square of window. Then, naked for a moment, he had put on first clean body-linen, and next a white shirt, its pearly studs discreetly gleaming, with a smart upstanding Piccadilly collar. Some wrestling with the links in the stiffly-starched cuffs had mercifully left no mark. Then there had followed his new tight striped trousers, carefully braced to the right hang. Next he had chosen a tie, one of the very smallest bows for summer, and, after two attempts, he had got it into the neat flat knot he liked. Then the waistcoat, free from the effects of the inexpert pawings of Billy, thank goodness. He had dealt with his hair next, applying the Rowland's Macassar that he now seldom used and getting the oiled hair to part accurately in the centre of his head. Then there had been the shoes, the polishing of which was perhaps the only thing young Billy did with any regular success. Over the shoes had gone white spats, after a little irritating work attempting to efface a long streak of

what looked like rose madder from his brushes. And finally, when the spotted mirror had seemed to show that everything was as it should be, the morning coat of light grey tweed with the ivory-coloured buttons that still pleased him. And he was in armour complete.

Just at the corner of the new bridge he had bought a carnation from the flower-girl who customarily stood there, her big oval bloom-crammed basket at her feet.

‘Thank you, yer honour,’ she had said.

He had forgotten that she was Irish. The sound of those lilting syllables had made him purse his lips in sharp remembrance.

However, getting down from his hansom in Brook Street, for the second time within twenty-four hours, he felt that at least everything outward about him was as it should be.

Yes, said the footman who had gone to ask, Lady Augusta would receive him. He followed the man—was he one of the six with matching calves?—to the morning-room. And there was Lady Augusta, plump and pink of face, a crinoline of blue trimmed with magenta billowing plangently round her. And there beside her, in a deep green dress with a green-and-white striped bodice that set off magnificently the deep curve of her bosom, was Elizabeth Hills.

Godfrey felt he could hardly look at her. She seemed to him so much to embody the highest feminine virtues, grace, gentleness and both maturity and innocence. She might indeed understand the workings of the human frame, but she could not know the workings of the human mind. What could such a person as she know of the inner tortuosities that had led him where he had gone after he had left her the night before? Her very unusualness, this choice of such a profession, was after all, as he had learnt from her own lips, only an excess of womanly tenderness springing from the sufferings of her mother.

They talked of the ball. Godfrey contrived to drag up from a memory that he had not consciously filled details of the affair which he hoped it would please Lady Augusta to hear praised. He did not dare attempt to say anything expressly designed for Elizabeth's ear.

Lady Augusta listened to his compliments for almost ten minutes. Then a sharper glance came into the eyes in that pink puffy face.

'But to hear all this,' she exclaimed, 'when last night you said that you had to leave early so as to have light for your wretched painting.'

Godfrey felt an acute shame. Ordinarily he would have passed over Lady Augusta's slightly malicious attack with a laugh. But the memory of what it was that had caused him to make that excuse to leave was iron-hard.

Yet rescue came from an unexpected quarter.

'Ah, your painting, Mr Mann,' Elizabeth broke in, in her quiet voice enriched with its slight American accent, 'I had hoped to ask you about that last night.'

'Lady Augusta would call it my daubing,' Godfrey said, still not wholly on his balance.

A swift look of plain displeasure came into Elizabeth's luminous grey eyes.

'I hope you do not apply that description to your work yourself,' she said.

Lady Augusta laughed.

'Now, Godfrey,' she mocked, 'you must take care what you say in Elizabeth's presence. She is a serious young lady, don't forget.'

'And I am a serious young man. You have often enough rebuked me for it.'

'Well,' said Elizabeth, 'I tell you frankly I am glad to hear you make the claim. I shall never rebuke you on that score.'

Godfrey smiled.

‘May I venture to hope, however,’ he said, ‘that, if you see the need, you will not hesitate to rebuke me wherever rebuke is required.’

‘Ah, Godfrey,’ said Lady Augusta, ‘you make the request lightly enough, but I warn you you are likely to rue it.’

‘Oh come, you are painting Miss Hills as a real dragon.’

‘Don’t you be so sure that she is not,’ Lady Augusta declared.

Before Godfrey had a chance to reply other callers were announced. While they were being introduced he thought about the exchange that had just taken place. Lady Augusta’s warning he dismissed. It pleased her to pretend that anybody with a spark of independence was a monster. But the request he had made to Elizabeth, almost without thinking, caused him to look at himself now with more than a little wryness. What if she should, by some unimaginable chance, learn how he had conducted himself last night? Her rebuke then would be absolute.

However, he had said that the events of the night were to be blotted out, and blotted out they would be.

‘And you still have not told me about your painting.’

Elizabeth had left the others and come straight over to him.

‘And,’ she added now, ‘you are to tell me about it without false modesty. I hear that the Queen has bought your picture in the Academy, and for six hundred pounds.’

‘Yes, that is true. And it has been an enormous encouragement. A practical one too. I had a letter only a few days ago from Herr Pohlmann, who is our leading art-dealer here, asking what other work I was doing. And after many a year of steady discouragement from such people as my family trustees that falls sweetly on the ear.’

‘So you have been persistent. I like to hear that.’

Elizabeth smiled at him. He bathed in the light of those grey eyes.

‘But, tell me, what is the subject of your painting in the Academy?’ she went on. ‘Aunt Augusta likes to pretend she can never remember. She says it is something to do with some ancient and obscure Italian poet.’

Godfrey laughed.

‘She is wrong, and she is right,’ he said. ‘My subject is from Goethe, from his poem “Tasso”. I call the picture “Torquato Tasso Leaving the City of Ferrara”.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Elizabeth. ‘I am afraid you will have to write me down as a hopeless American provincial. It all means nothing to me, except that I find I have the impression that Goethe is a writer to be avoided.’

‘Yes, I suspect—whisper it not—that Her Majesty did not know the subject was from his work.’

‘Then he is disreputable?’

Elizabeth looked at him sharply, with the beginnings even of distaste.

‘No. Goethe was a very great man, even the greatest Germany has produced. But I must confess his private life was not perfect.’

Again Elizabeth looked uneasy.

‘I know very little of literature,’ she said. ‘But it seems to me plain that a writer cannot be truly great if his manner of living leaves anything to be desired.’

Into Godfrey’s mind there flashed the vision—unbidden, unwanted—of just what the life of one promising young painter had left to be desired the night before. And the vision was uncomfortably precise.

‘It is a difficult subject,’ he said at last, and decidedly lamely.

‘Well, I am altogether inexperienced in such matters. So let us leave them to a better time. And in the meanwhile tell me instead just what Torquato Tasso—was that it?—was doing leaving the city of Ferrara.’

Godfrey, storing away this confirmation of the blessed inexperience of this moment-by-moment more admirable girl, addressed himself with considerable enthusiasm to explaining to her about the poet Tasso. He expanded on the troubles that had beset him in sixteenth-century Italy and what the great Goethe had seen his life as signifying. He entered headlong on the feelings that had caused him himself, after his years of study in Germany, to choose this particular incident to embody in paint.

‘You see, Goethe—you must forgive me for so frequently mentioning his name, but he is a poet of supreme beauty and a supreme quester for truth—you see, Goethe wrote of Tasso as a man who could not come to terms with the world that surrounded him but who, by his poetry, was able to find a better way. I try to show the moment of Tasso’s leaving Ferrara as the moment of his decision. I have sought to convey all that that meant, the seeing of the world around one for what it is, mean, sordid, dulled and muddled, and the decision, at whatever cost, to take the higher brighter path.’

He came to a tumultuous full stop.

‘But—But you ought to see the picture,’ he burst out again, feeling the importance of this girl, this unknown quantity at every instant becoming more and better known, understanding this, his deepest belief. ‘You must see the picture—if I may suggest it. The picture is what conveys it all. What I hope conveys it.’

‘Mr Mann,’ Elizabeth said, looking at him full, with the light pouring from her grey eyes, ‘I will see your picture. I shall see it at the earliest opportunity.’

The words were sweet. But there was something in her tone, something unmistakable, which robbed him of his fullest triumph. There was a note of doubt.

‘I fear I have spoken too wildly,’ he said, hoping that this and nothing more had been the cause of her hesitancy.

‘No,’ she answered. ‘No, it is better to speak wildly and to bring the truth to light, whatever it is, than to be circumspect and hide it. That I believe.’

‘And I.’

He hoped by the fervour he put into the two short words to win what he felt he had not succeeded in gaining so far, this clear-sighted creature’s whole approval.

But he was to be left in doubt at that moment as to how far he had done so.

‘Elizabeth.’

It was Lady Augusta.

Elizabeth was quick to turn and answer her, quicker than Godfrey altogether liked.

‘My child, you must not talk to Mr Mann all morning. Indeed, I wonder whether you should be let talk to Mr Mann at all.’

‘Oh, I do not think he will too much influence me.’

Were the words a jest? They did not quite sound as if they altogether had been. But it was too late to find out now.

‘Lady Augusta,’ Godfrey said, resigning himself, ‘I am to blame for having kept Miss Hills to myself for far too long. And I have prolonged my visit past the courteous.’

He bowed over the pink shining be-ringed hand. Lady Augusta gave him a smile that said that nonsense was nonsense, and he turned to leave.

But, just as he had reached the door, Elizabeth came sweeping across to him.

‘Mr Mann,’ she said, in a voice that had a quiet intensity to it which quickened him as if, poring over an old document, he had made a discovery of blazoning importance.

‘Mr Mann, I would not like you to leave under a misapprehension over my attitude to your picture. I say this

only because I know you attach the greatest importance to it, and I do you the justice of being equally serious.'

'Miss Hills—' he began.

But she cut him short.

'No, you would make a mistake even more mistaken. Mr Mann, I must tell you: I cannot sympathise with such a work as you have described. It seems to me folly—'

She checked herself. But her determination broke through and she went on, her grey eyes shining with redoubled fervency.

'No, I will say it. It is folly. It seems to me folly, the greatest, to refuse to accept the world around you and not to try to change it where it needs changing. It seems to me wrong, wrong, to seek to soar away instead on a pale hunt for an ideal Beauty.'

Godfrey raised a hand in protest.

'No, let me say it. Mr Mann, if that is all your paint-brush attempts, then to me a scrubbing-brush is infinitely preferable.'

Chapter Four

So, Godfrey thought, standing feeling a little dazed out in the sunshine of Brook Street, so I have had the rebuke I rashly asked for. And it stings.

For a moment, one moment, he was tempted to hail the first passing hansom and have himself driven as fast as the horse would go down to the East End, to one of those sleazy neighbourhoods that he had begun visiting, fearfully delighted, when he had first returned from Germany. There he could slip down some narrow passage and plunge deep into what lay behind. But he called himself angrily to order.

No, that was no way to conduct his life. To fly like a whipped child to the secret comfort of the sweets bottle. No, if Elizabeth Hills had proved to be other than he had thought her—or as, to tell the truth, he had imagined her—then he must accept it.

Because, he found, hurt him though she might, he still valued her good opinion. The clear light of those grey eyes, and too the seriousness of mien that the restrained colours of her quiet clothes expressed, made him feel with every fibre of his mind that here was someone before whom he wished to stand untarnished. Oh, how the simple stripes of her dress bodice just now had caught the light in the swell of her full bosom.

Abruptly into his head there obtruded, sharp and clear, the positive sight, it seemed, of Lisa's small but eager breasts. He forced it away.

Taking a deep breath, he found he had come to a decision. He would not, as he had intended, leave London and visit Paris, from where a friend had written describing in glowing terms the work of a painter new to him, one Gustave Moreau. No, he would stay in London for the rest of the summer, and, hot and unpleasant though it would be, he would work. He would embark on his picture for next

year's Academy which so far he had barely even let simmer in the recesses of his mind. He would bring it forward, he would think, he would read, he would spend time in the British Museum among the casts. He would do whatever was necessary to bring fully into focus a subject that would grip and hold him.

But what subject? Would it still be the companion piece to 'Torquato Tasso' that he had vaguely contemplated? That stood for what he believed, and he should state his beliefs. If Elizabeth scorned his faith, he ought to be able to prove to her with his paint-brush that that was worth more than her scrubbing-brush.

He felt a dull colour mount up at the renewed thought of that jibe.

Or would he find another subject? Perhaps 'The Apotheosis of the Kitchen-maid' with scrubbing-brush triumphantly raised? That would be what would please Miss Elizabeth Hills.

That afternoon he set himself a practice task. He chose the dulllest subject he could find in the British Museum, the Labours of Hercules from the Greek vases, and he drew as hard as he knew how. When he got back to his studio, fagged but with a feeling of satisfaction, there was a letter that had come in the late delivery. The writing on the envelope was strange to him, flowing and forthright. He opened it and looked at the signature at the end of the note inside. 'Elizabeth Hills.'

Quickly he read.

Dear Mr Mann, I went to the Academy before luncheon to see your picture, though I am sure my Aunt thought me unduly hurried, if not worse. But I felt it was no more than I owed you after what I had said. Let me tell you at once that I found the picture extraordinarily striking. It outshone, to my eye, everything else in the Exhibition. And, having said

that, let me add at once also that I cannot alter my view. Indeed, I saw the painting for what it was the more clearly, I think, from having heard your eloquent defence this morning. So there is a subject on which we must differ. But I ought not to have said what I did. No, I ought to have said it, but I ought not to have expressed myself so strongly. I can only plead that I too have my beliefs, that if I spoke of a scrubbing-brush it was because truly that common domestic article stands for much in my eyes. The world that I see around me, or that I saw in New York, for I have as yet seen little of the real world here, stands badly in need of scrubbing-brushes. There is truly too much dirt everywhere, and there are people dying because of it. So will you excuse the outburst of too passionate a faith? I hope you will, and that we shall be able to meet on terms of friendship. On Friday my Aunt takes me in the afternoon to the Park and we will be there until the Four-in-Hand Club drive. She tells me that this will show me in one the pride, the wealth and the blood of Old England. I would, I suspect, be less likely to vent my impudent American views if you were there.

And there was a postscript.

Perhaps I should not have written. I am putting it in the post before I change my mind.

The sun was shining. Godfrey, once more dressed with immense care, stood in the Park watching the carriages go by. He was early, he knew. The Four-in-Hand Club parade of coaches did not start until five o'clock. Lady Augusta would hardly be there two whole hours before. But he had been unable to prevent himself finishing his luncheon in no time, dressing afterwards with great speed despite all his care and then setting out much too soon.

But the Park was wonderfully pleasant. He wandered to and fro looking up at the sky. Scarcely a cloud, and those there were all puffy white. The great boughs of the huge

trees were dark with their full summer foliage, stretching from one to the other, touching but monumentally still. Across on the far side of the wooden-railed ride in the sunlight the grass looked greener than would have seemed possible in all the dust. The people strolling there equally looked finer perhaps than they really were, with all the light-coloured crinolines swaying and dancing as their wearers walked, the straight-backed men beside them in greys and blacks making a delightful contrast.

He turned to look once more at the line of bowling carriages and beautifully turned-out riders. Was the Bosworths' barouche coming towards him? Would he see Elizabeth before she saw him? She would be looking out for him, if she had been sincere in what she had written in her letter—her somewhat unconventional letter at this moment reposing in his inside pocket— and, whatever faults he might hold against her, if he held any, lack of sincerity was certainly not one of them.

Onwards the carriages rolled, broughams and big high barouches, victorias and open landaus, with dancing among them a scattering of bright phaetons and tiny superbly elegant traps, their drivers often feminine and of that altogether dazzling smartness that announced the kept woman. From the height of the vehicles their occupants, a whole rainbow of bright colours in bonnets, shawls, dresses and opened parasols, looked down at the loungers on the rails. A light haze of reddish dust rose at the feet of the groomed and shining horses. Standing up above it like towers on the backs of the larger carriages were the liveried footmen, rigid as carved figures, and in front were the coachmen, almost as still, enormous of shoulder, proud every one as Lucifer, directing hard self-contained glances from side to side.

Behind Godfrey, as a particularly dashing little trap passed drawn by two milk-white ponies with harness of

white leather glinting with silver and cushions covered in leopard skin, its solitary female occupant, tall and erect, her long whip held upright as a lance, two portly gentlemen broke into speech.

‘Excuse me, sir, can you tell me who that lady is?’

‘Why, yes, sir. She is Mrs Gilmore. She is kept by Lord Fitzwalter. The talk is he’s married her, but you can’t believe what such women say.’

‘No, sir, no. But, tell me, was she ever gay? I don’t recollect seeing her about town.’

‘I think not, sir. I think not.’

Godfrey moved away. There were things he did not wish to think about.

At last he saw Lady Augusta’s barouche. It was in a solid line of other vehicles, none as stately and well turned-out, and it was proceeding at a very slow pace. And long before he felt it appropriate to raise his hat he was aware that Elizabeth had seen him. What quite it was that betrayed this he could scarcely say. Perhaps it was a slight stiffening of her back or an extra rigidity of her head under its light grey bonnet. But he knew it clearly as if it had been spelt out on a page.

Lady Augusta, on the other hand, did not recognise him until the carriage was almost level with where he stood. Then, with a complicated gesture of her brilliant violet parasol that threatened some harm to the hats of the occupants of a neighbouring brougham, she indicated that they were going to halt by the Serpentine where the band would be playing. Godfrey walked after them, never quite losing sight of the two tall Bosworth footmen standing up behind.

Down by the Serpentine within sound of the band’s thumpy military marches Lady Augusta had remained in the carriage while Elizabeth had got down and was standing

beside the heavily-sprung vehicle. Godfrey paid his respects to Lady Augusta and then spoke quietly.

‘Miss Hills, I am extremely indebted to you for your letter.’

‘I ought not to have sent it. Aunt Augusta would be shocked.’

Godfrey smiled a little.

‘I don’t think so,’ he said.

‘No, perhaps you are right,’ Elizabeth answered, with a look of quick perception. ‘You know, she is not my aunt, although I call her so, and I had not met her until a month ago. But I have begun to suspect she is not as easily shocked as she lets be believed.’

‘I am glad we can agree on some subject,’ Godfrey said.

‘Ah no, Mr Mann, we can agree about most things, I’m sure. It seems to me we have more than a little in common, you and I. We are both rebels, you know.’

‘Yes, I know indeed. And let me say that I admire your rebellion, especially as it is so much harder for a woman to defy the conventions.’

‘You’re kind. But how am I defying the conventions now? By writing to a gentleman I have met only once? If that’s as far as I go in the rebellion way, Aunt Augusta has nothing to fear.’

‘You sound bitter. And on such a sunny day.’

Elizabeth looked down at the tips of her boots protruding from the circle of her wide grey skirt, again no hooped and extravagant crinoline.

‘Well, I am bitter, and the sunshine and all this ...’

She gestured at the band, the onlookers round it, colourful and animated, the sparkling lake with the rowing-boats gently gliding here and there and the polished carriages, stationary or moving.

‘All this makes me, I am afraid, more bitter. The world is not like this, Mr Mann. The world is not all glitter and

prettiness. London, I know, must be often dark and noisome, even on a day like this.'

Godfrey thought of his plunges in the East End into the black hinterlands to the rows of cheerful if poor shops, the old-iron merchants, the second-hand-furniture places, the sellers of pigs' trotters and pigs' heads.

'Yes,' he said, 'London can be unpleasant. No, it can be worse than that. Dark and evil.'

'And I, who could help to make it less so, yes, really help, am kept like a doll here.'

She raised her grey eyes—how splendidly they flashed—and looked him full in the face.

'Oh, I must not blame Aunt Augusta,' she went on. 'She's been kindness in itself. And I really had no claim on her. But she cannot conceive of a life other than her own, and she would like me to be a last daughter to her.'

'And you,' Godfrey asked, 'instead of the balls and the calls, the races and the opera, and in the end the triumphant marriage, what do you see for yourself?'

'Work, Mr Mann. That's what I see. Oh, don't mistake me, I should like to be married as much as any woman. But I should like to do what I am fitted for as well. To bring cleanliness to where there is appalling dirt, to bring light to dark places, to save lives.'

Godfrey stood and admired her. She was magnificent. As she had spoken those uncommonly direct words her back had been straight as a soldier's, her bosom had risen like the figurehead of a ship ploughing through seas.

'And you must do what you are made for, you must,' he answered her, carried away beyond his expectations.

From the carriage above them came Lady Augusta's sharp cracked voice.

'Must? Must, Godfrey? What are you saying to the child? I cannot hear. Come up. Come up at once, before you encourage her into some ridiculous foolishness.'

So they both got up into the carriage with its well-padded dark-green seats, its silk linings of a lighter green and its odour of leather and horses.

‘Well,’ Lady Augusta demanded, ‘and what was all that? And it is of no use to tell me that I am an interfering old woman and should not ask. I do ask. And I mean to have a reply.’

‘So you shall, Lady Augusta,’ Godfrey said. ‘Miss Hills was telling me that, for all your goodness to her, she feels confined in the life she is leading at present. And, with respect, I endorse that. A holiday is an excellent thing, and she should of course see as much of London as she can. But she has spent years training herself for an occupation, and it would be wrong to stifle it.’

‘Wrong.’

If a lady can snort, Lady Augusta snorted.

And then she turned and looked towards the slow line of carriages passing on the far side, their horses matched and glossy, their coachmen pillars of reliability, their paintwork and harness polished and gleaming.

‘Well, I suppose if she must, she must,’ she said. ‘But I cannot pretend to understand. Look. Look there.’

The violet parasol pointed like an angry spear. Godfrey and Elizabeth looked. There on the far side of the ride were two girls on horseback, sisters perhaps they looked so alike. And it was plain to Godfrey why Lady Augusta had so abruptly pointed them out. They were a sort of perfection, the perfection of English girlhood, so right indeed that he would never have dared paint them for fear of producing something altogether too like an over-idealised imaginary concept. They sat their horses with complete assurance, backs straight yet supple, heads well carried on slim necks, white tulle riding-skirts sweeping gracefully down the side of their mounts under clouds of muslin. And their complexions:

they were apple blossom, pure nature, too much itself for art, arrived at and simply there.

‘That is what I would like a protégée of mine to be,’ Lady Augusta said. ‘It’s what my girls were like. And they married superbly, both of them.’

She turned from the apple-blooming equestriennes and looked at Elizabeth.

‘And you could be like that,’ she said. ‘Well, no, perhaps you have not all those natural advantages. But you’re handsome enough. And, if you had consented to go to a good dressmaker, we would have made something of you. A great deal of you. Yet it is not to be, I suppose.’

‘Aunt Augusta, you know it could not be.’

‘And instead you are going to live surrounded by nasty smelly bandages. It’s too ridiculous.’

‘Well, Aunt, there will not be any smelly bandages. I’m not to be allowed to practise over here. I have made every inquiry and there’s no hope.’

‘Well, then—But, no, you’ll find something equally impossible.’

‘I think I have. There’s an immense amount to be done in sanitary reform. I can be of real use there.’

‘Sanitation. One hears of nothing else these days. When I was a girl there was no such thing.’

‘Yes,’ said Elizabeth, with a touch of sharpness to equal Lady Augusta’s. ‘There was no such thing, and people died because of it.’

And so, sitting in the green-leather upholstered carriage in the sunshine by the Serpentine with the band playing its bouncy music, it was agreed that Elizabeth should attend shortly the inaugural meeting of the Society for the Promotion of Sanitary Visiting Among the London Poor and that in due course she would take up whatever work she found in that field.

‘But you needn’t think I shall go with you to your meeting,’ Lady Augusta concluded, with a resumption of her old sharpness. ‘You will have to go with Josie. An occasion like that should suit her.’

‘Josie?’ Elizabeth inquired.

Godfrey took it on himself to reply.

‘Miss Josephine Marcham, a cousin of Lady Augusta’s, somewhat elderly. I have the honour to know her.’

‘And the gentlemanliness not to say she is a wretched fool,’ Lady Augusta put in.

‘Oh come.’

‘Oh come yourself, young man. Josie never once goes out of doors from the first of October to the first of June. She says she fears raw air.’

‘And she is to accompany me?’ Elizabeth said, consciously strengthening, Godfrey thought, her American intonation. ‘I could not go alone?’

‘Certainly not. A young girl like you.’

‘A qualified medical practitioner,’ Elizabeth said, as smartly.

‘Yes,’ Lady Augusta replied, with a scorn which it was impossible to fix as real or assumed. ‘In America.’

Mercifully at that moment there came the sound of a coach horn and all round them heads turned to look for the coming of the drive of the Four-in-Hand Club. They waited for a little in silence, a somewhat constrained silence, and then the leading coach appeared.

‘It is the Duke of Beaufort with the ribbons,’ Lady Augusta announced.

And they knew that it was more than mere information she was giving them.

Certainly the oncoming coach made a fine sight. Godfrey recalled Lady Augusta’s words from the letter in his inside

pocket, 'the pride, the wealth' and what was it? 'the blood of Old England'.

He looked at the wonderfully wide-chested horses, four glossy bays, their harness gleaming brilliantly as their coats, its brass jingling above the trotting of the sixteen sharp hooves. He looked at the Duke, in the brown uniform of the club, his gilt buttons catching the sun and glinting dazzlingly, holding the long reins with nonchalant confidence. He looked at the party on the top of the brightly-painted spotless coach. They radiated assurance, tall men and elegant women. Behind them stood the grooms, iron pillars of trust. The wheels of the gay rockingly sprung vehicle twirled easily in the sunshine.

Well, it was a triumph. That was beyond denial. Perhaps nowhere else on earth could such a turnout be contrived, so rich, so confident, so easily powerful and—damn it—so beautiful.

Nevertheless he did not feel obliged to surrender to the appeal that Lady Augusta was making through the sight.

'And there is the coach of the Royal Horse Guards,' she was saying. 'Captain Baxter, a fine soldier, so they tell me.'

Nor was his holding-back because all this strong yet elegant display did not match his own notions of the Beautiful. You could perhaps paint this, he saw, and say something through it as well as you could say something in painting an imaginary Torquato Tasso leaving an imaginary city of Ferrara. And this painting would say what Lady Augusta so obviously felt.

'Though of course,' her cracked voice broke in on him again, 'his private life is wholly deplorable.'

Was that it? That Lady Augusta did not in the end absolutely feel what she saw herself as obliged to put before this American niece of hers? Was this why the Drive of the Four-in-Hand Club in Hyde Park could not finally replace Torquato Tasso Leaving the City of Ferrara?

He felt obscurely that he still had not got there. The former picture seemed inadequate, but not through any comparison with the latter.

He sighed. The rest of the coaches in the drive went by, brilliant yellows, blues, reds, greens.

'Well, thank you, Aunt' Elizabeth said at last. 'I'm truly glad to have seen that.'

'And truly glad, no doubt, that you will never be one of those taking part?' Lady Augusta asked wryly.

'Well, yes. Yes. I cannot disguise that.'

'Then go next week and take part in your Sanitary Meeting, my dear. I'm sure it will not be as elegant.'

Then, as Lady Augusta told the coachman to move off, the little silver and snow-white toy trap driven by the dashing Mrs Gilmore who was kept by Lord Whoever-it-was, came spanking by, a vehicle not a whit less well turned out than the Four-in-Hand coaches. And Godfrey experienced one brief vision of himself on the lacework counterpane of the bed in the house off Coventry Street. He resolutely pushed it from his mind.

Chapter Five

So a week after the drive of the Four-in-Hand Club Elizabeth, accompanied by Miss Josephine Marcham, fifty or fifty-fivish, stout, inclined to tremble, enormously wrapped in a number of shawls although the weather was imperturbably fine, wearing green-lensed spectacles, arrived in one of the Bosworth carriages at the St James's Hall to attend the first meeting of the Society for the Promotion of Sanitary Visiting Among the London Poor. Godfrey was waiting, by arrangement, to meet them.

He had not originally thought of going, though he had hoped from the very moment of that blending of sympathies between himself and Elizabeth when she had declared to him, standing beside the carriage, her determination to do the work she had fitted herself for that he would see her often. But before they had parted that day she had extracted from him a promise to be present at this meeting.

'You owe it to me,' she had said.

'Owe it to you?'

'I went and saw your picture.'

'And the meeting, of course, means as much to you as my painting, of which you so much disapprove, means to me.'

She had looked him full in the face at that.

'Yes,' she had said. 'You seem always to see such things.'

And so he had agreed to be there. 'And, besides,' Elizabeth had added while Lady Augusta's attention was elsewhere, 'I shall need someone to relieve me of the necessity of looking after Miss Marcham.'

Godfrey saw the force of this as soon as he greeted them. Miss Marcham, once the carriage door was open, expressed doubts about crossing the pavement.

'It would appear to be quite a windy day,' she said.

'No, no, I assure you,' Godfrey countered firmly. 'Not a breath of air stirring.'

Miss Marcham came down on to the carriage steps.

‘Good gracious me, Mr Mann, there is an odour.’

There was, of course. A great many horses had drawn up outside the narrow-fronted hall and the roadway was well coated with trodden dung. And then the arrival of so many charitably disposed persons had attracted an unusually large number of beggars. From time to time a policeman had moved them on, but they had always returned. And it would seem their smell was something no guardian of the law could disperse. It hung distinctly on the warm unmoving air.

‘It is a great deal better inside,’ Godfrey offered.

‘Well, no. No, I fear not. Elizabeth, my dear—such a sweet girl—do you not think it would be very much better, very much safer, to go straight back to Brook Street?’

‘But, Miss Marcham, the meeting. It’s very important.’

‘Oh, yes, my dear, I know that. But one’s health is important too. One must look to that first. Scripture teaches us so.’

However, eventually, with the aid of a cambric handkerchief richly soaked in lavender water, Miss Marcham made her dangerous way across the pavement and in at one of the two tall entrance passages. But the dash to safety was not without incident. In her agitation she put a foot firmly into some mess left by the dog accompanying a blind beggar who had been chased away not much earlier. Godfrey, who alone saw what had happened, decided to say nothing even when, seated at last in the places reserved for them in the front row, it became obvious that some of the odour of the unpleasant world outside now accompanied them.

Up on the platform the Bishop of Stanmore, pink-faced and benign yet a figure of plain authority, chairman of the meeting because some of his flock were among the poor to be visited, to give them ‘a few words of introduction’. The

audience below, mostly female, a shifting sea of light-coloured summer fabrics with here and there splashes of more vivid Prussian blue, magenta and salmon pink, listened decorously. Murmured agreement rose up at almost every phrase. At last the Bishop presented to them 'in the happy expectation that their work would be begun on a firmly scientific basis, Mr Arthur Balneal, the celebrated investigator'. There was long and steady applause.

Miss Marcham turned to Godfrey.

'You will notice that I do not clap,' she said. 'But please do not think it is because of any lack of proper enthusiasm. It is that I am afraid of the effect of undue warmth in my hands.'

'Yes, yes, of course. A most wise precaution.'

Elizabeth, on his other side, leant a little towards him. He saw that her eyes were shining with a sword-like brilliance. Was this the effect of the Bishop's words, anodyne though they had seemed to him?

'What do you think of that?' she demanded with an anger so evident that it disabused him in an instant of any notion that she had been receiving inspiration. 'What was it? "Our lecturer whom I am sure we can rely upon not to trespass on that ignorance of vice that is the mark of the lady"? Wasn't that it?'

'Yes. Yes, I think so. The very words.'

'If the Society is going to be conducted on those lines, they might as well none of them have come here.'

Godfrey shrugged a little.

'A bishop has to uphold the proprieties,' he suggested. 'You mustn't be disheartened before anything has begun.'

'No,' Elizabeth countered so sharply that her voice was easily distinguishable over the continuing applause. 'No, you should not make excuses for him. If he really interests himself in the work, then he ought to believe that bringing dirt and disease fully to the light is the only way of ridding ourselves of them.'

The clapping had died away. Godfrey gave one last look at those shining grey eyes and turned to the platform.

Mr Arthur Balneal, the celebrated investigator, was a tall stooping man of perhaps thirty-five, pale-faced, with a very large nose and a pair of very large spectacles. He spoke at length. He did not hesitate to quote statistics. London, 'the empress city', had one quarter more people than Pekin, two-thirds more than Paris, twice as many as Constantinople, five times as many as Vienna, New York or Madrid. Figures poured out, numbers, ages, occupations. The celebrated investigator was tireless.

Before long Godfrey entirely lost the thread. Instead private thoughts began to drift through his mind. Elizabeth, what about her? Should he actually be thinking of her as the person he would one day make his wife? Never before had he given any real consideration to marriage. He had been perhaps married already: to his easel. But now ...?

'... the atmosphere rendered altogether unpleasant for the whole length of that court.' He caught on for a moment or two to Balneal's description. But soon—'children and even, I regret to say, females hardly of tender years in an almost totally pre-lapsarian state'—the fluent syllables again ceased to make any impact and his personal preoccupations came to the fore.

Was it right on such short acquaintance to feel about her as he thought he felt? Did he really feel this? Was this the state of being in love? Surely he had felt about Elizabeth on that very first meeting at Lady Augusta's ball no more than he felt about her now? Or did he feel more? And he had never, to be totally honest, experienced in her presence the least inkling of physical desire.

And he had proved himself capable of that. But that was a moment—A moment? It was a night, almost a whole night—that was to be expunged from his memory.

‘... whole buildings resting on nothing more than pools of a substance that could benefit only the market gardener ...’

He looked up at Balneal. That pale face and those earnest spectacles, had they really explored so thoroughly the tumbledown night-black areas he was describing? Presumably they had. The Bishop of Stanmore had vouched for him. Perhaps, then, on some occasion when he himself had gone a-hunting off the Ratcliffe Highway or somewhere of that sort the two of them had been within a few yards of each other. That would have been an embarrassing enough encounter. But it would not happen now. That kind of expedition of his, mysteriously disturbing to the pulses, curiously exciting even though nothing tangible had ever happened, that was an ended thing.

‘... upwards of two hundred persons in this locality had the services of a single *cabinet*.’

How odd the French word sounded, pronounced by Balneal with a special lilting delicacy. No matter. Elizabeth, that was what he ought to be thinking of. He must decide exactly what his feelings about her were. Not desire. And yet ... Well, wasn't it true that in bed three nights ago, finding sleep hard to come by, it had been the thought of her, or of her imagined sea-ploughing bosom, that had been responsible for a certain effect.

But ought Elizabeth and that habit, that deplorable and even dangerous habit, to be connected at all? How difficult it was.

Perhaps after all he ought to pay attention to Balneal. Elizabeth would undoubtedly want to discuss his lecture afterwards.

He listened.

And was dismayed to find that the celebrated investigator's smooth-flowing words were echoing distantly the train of his own thoughts. They were reciting statistics on the incidence of what Balneal delicately called 'behaviour

at variance with the Second and Third of Victoria Cap. 42'. Which was presumably prostitution. Lisa's living.

'In the district that I have referred to as Blank Court of the females above the age of twelve some eighty-four per cent could fairly be described as Children of Night. In the district we have spoken of as White Alley the figure for these soiled doves reaches almost to ninety per cent. And, I may add, that I did not consider it proper to make inquiries where the subject was below the age of consent.'

Godfrey took a quick glance at Elizabeth. She was leaning intently forward, her eyes luminous as lamps on a fog-swirling night. Yes, she would be following this with the keenest interest. This was surely a product of that squalor she had dedicated herself to combat.

And on Balneal flowed. Sanitation, hygiene, 'the intermingling of those whom God has decreed apart'. On it went.

Miss Marcham began, very gently and softly, to snore. Godfrey stole a glance at Elizabeth to share the joke. But he found her still totally intent, leaning forward as if she were a ship with the tide running beneath her.

At last with some rousing words about 'the need, the imperative need thoroughly to ascertain the whole condition of the poor' the celebrated investigator brought his lecture to an end. His audience, as if perhaps determined to make up for any momentary failures of attention, applauded him at even greater length than they had applauded the Bishop. Above the noise Elizabeth spoke sharply.

'Listen, you must know how an affair of this sort is conducted? Will it be over now? Can I go up on to the platform?'

'Yes, I suppose it is over. But, Miss Hills, you surely aren't thinking ...'

'I most certainly am.'

The Yankee accent was almost knife-like now.

‘But why? I’m sure the best way for you to propose your contribution would be to write to the Bishop and say—’

‘No. It’s not that. I want to tell them how wrong they have been. Right now.’

‘But how wrong? Why?’

Godfrey felt a certain alarmed embarrassment.

‘How wrong? Did you not hear? Every word that man spoke was designed to hide something. Investigator. He did nothing but draw veil after veil over whatever he touched on.’

‘But surely,’ Godfrey said, rather wishing she would speak less loudly. ‘Surely he really revealed quite a lot about insanitary conditions. What was it? Two hundred people with the services of a single—a single ...’

‘Yes. You cannot say it. You see yourself as “in the presence of a lady”. So you cannot even mention the word “privy”, no more than Mr Balneal with his “*cabinet*”.’

Her mimicking of that lilting French was savage.

‘And I’ve no doubt,’ she went on, ‘that you refused even to take in some of the other things he wrapped in his muslin-cloth of pretty words. He was talking about prostitution. Do you know that if that trade is sufficiently brought to light it can be finished with? Ended? But no, all you and your Mr Balneal will do is to talk of doves, soiled doves, Children of Night and unfortunates.’

Godfrey, quailing under this unexpected assault, and knowing it to be to an extent justified, yet experienced a feeling of almost dazzled awe that this girl could take such things and handle them confidently as he himself handled his brushes. He was also not a little thankful that the applause for Balneal was so loud and long. With any luck it would have blotted out at least the more vigorous of Elizabeth’s words.

But it seemed not to have been entirely effective. Miss Marcham tapped him on the arm.

'You were speaking of doves,' she said. 'I heard Miss Hills refer to doves.'

'Yes.'

It was all he could say.

'So charming. So soft. I always think Nature is so interesting. In the summer, of course.'

'Yes,' Godfrey said. 'Yes, it is.'

And then he was aware that, while his attention had been distracted, Elizabeth had left her chair and was advancing towards the short flight of carpet-covered steps leading up to the platform.

For a moment he thought of hurrying across and forcibly detaining her. But he knew at once that she would not let him.

'Oh,' said Miss Marcham, 'Miss Hills, she is going up there. I must introduce her to the Bishop. But those steps. Mr Mann, do you think they are perfectly safe?'

'I think', Godfrey said, 'that Miss Hills is going to talk to the Bishop without an introduction.'

'Dear me, how very strange.'

Up on the platform Elizabeth had indeed gone straight over to the Bishop and Balneal. And it soon became apparent that she was addressing them as unequivocally as she had spoken to him.

'But—But—' he heard Balneal positively bleating. 'But, madam, I have six children.'

He felt tempted to laugh. And then he saw the Bishop.

A benign figure he might be with that broad face and rosy bald head. But he was also undoubtedly a man of authority from purple stock to ample black gaiters. And he was now, plainly, turning that full authority on Elizabeth.

'Unsafe, quite unsafe.'

His voice was a deep tolling of unhesitating command. But Elizabeth was answering him.

Godfrey half rose, full of unformed thoughts of hurrying up on to the platform and interposing himself between this girl and the formidable figure looming down on her. But what could he say? Elizabeth would not let him deflect her with any common courtesies.

He sat beside Miss Marcham and watched helpless to prevent the brow-beating. Fragments of the confrontation floated to him amid the buzz of conversation all around.

‘... no use, no use at all, merely covering up what ...’

And the Bishop commanding her to be less outspoken. And Balneal squeakily outraged. ‘My Lord, really I must beg you to ...’ And Elizabeth again. ‘No, my Lord, they must be brought to the light, brought to the light to wriggle and to die.’

Godfrey felt a great surge of admiration for the straight-backed proud-breasted figure up there. He wanted to crush her in his arms.

Oh yes, he recorded of himself. Oh yes, I am in love. Now.

And he vowed torrentially then that he would paint her. He would paint her, not facing an angry Bishop of the Church of England, but facing as angry an enemy. He would jettison all those ideas of yesterday. He would throw in his lot now with this sea-challenging creature, however far she went in her voyaging, whatever course she set, to whatever impossible northern pole.

Chapter Six

In the ensuing weeks, however, Godfrey's plan to paint the woman he was now sure he loved did not make the swift progress he had envisaged when he had escorted her back to Brook Street after they had accompanied to her home a Miss Marcham almost in palpitations at seeing Elizabeth so closely engaged with the Bishop. He had broached the plan to her the moment he could, but, though she had agreed without hesitation to sit, he had had to acknowledge that her thoughts had not been wholly with him. The fact of the matter was that the Bishop had asked her to join the Committee of the Society for the Promotion of Sanitary Visiting Among the London Poor.

No doubt he had at that time paid her triumph less attention than he should have done. Because it really had been a remarkable feat. The Bishop he knew by reputation well. He was not a man to receive new ideas. Beneath a silken soft public manner he had an oaken obstinacy. But Elizabeth had overcome it. Quite what had made the final breach in the old man's defences Godfrey had not learnt. He had reproached himself afterwards for not in his own excitement asking her. All he had gathered had been that Elizabeth had not scrupled to say she would publicly oppose the Society, so perhaps the Bishop had calculated that it might be better safely to house this unexpected firebrand.

The move had apparently horrified Arthur Balneal. Elizabeth had said that he had withdrawn his hand from hers in parting as if he had been asked to give a friendly clasp to a rattlesnake. And her grey eyes had cascaded with laughter.

She was wonderful. He had thought that more than once. She was so completely sure. He had realised then, as he had not before, the sheer extent of her belief that she knew the answer. It had up to then been hidden under her

acknowledgement of Lady Augusta's kindnesses, but then he had seen it to the full. No wonder she had succeeded in making herself a medical practitioner. Beneath that womanly exterior was a pure-forged blade of steel.

And how would he convey that in paint? It was on that question that his initial enthusiasm had checked. It had not proved easy to find the exactly right answer. He would paint her somehow fighting, yes. But how? And conquering. But whom? Against whom precisely ought she to be seen in battle?

Lying in his narrow bed in Gillingham Place that night after the St James's Hall meeting he had battered at the problem. His whirling thoughts had brought him to the point of elaborating a tremendous caricature of Reason soundly thrashing Prejudice, bearing a remarkable resemblance to the Bishop of Stanmore, when he had jerked himself into sense. No, his whole *raison d'être* as a person was to express in paint what he truly felt and believed. And he felt now, beyond all reservations, that he should portray this faith of Elizabeth's which he was proud to share. So there must be a subject that would convey this. But what? What?

His small bedroom had seemed intolerably hot and stuffy as he had continued to wrestle with this wiry ghost. And it had been only near dawn that he had at last given up, decided that he must have sleep and had sought it in the stratagem he hated most, recourse to sexual excitement.

On the night of the day he had decided that he must make Elizabeth his, it had been in the imagined and active arms of Lisa that he had lain at last.

But the next day did not miraculously bring him his answer. Nor did the days that followed. He asked himself if he was after all not in sympathy with Elizabeth. And angrily retorted that that must be. He was in love with her. He hoped to make her his wife, to share her life. So he must be

able to paint her as she was and with all that she stood for. But time passed and he could not find the answer.

So when a little later with the drawing to a close of the Season Elizabeth set out with the Bosworths for their Wiltshire estate, instead of feeling that a void was about to stretch out before him as he had expected, he almost welcomed her departure. He had agreed to go down there before Christmas and he hoped that a period of solitariness in London with, as they said, 'nobody in town' would mysteriously reveal to him just what the missing setting for the picture should be.

Elizabeth had suggested that he might perhaps begin his painting in Wiltshire. When she got back to London she intended to move into rooms of her own with perhaps a companion and devote all her time to her new work. 'So I fancy I shall not have many hours free to sit in front of your easel.'

'No, of course, you will not. But may I hope apart from that to see you quite frequently.'

'I should like that very much.'

Often in the hot and smelly London days that followed and on into the gradual start of autumn Godfrey held up that declaration in front of himself like a jewel. It was almost all he had to comfort him. The departure of his muse did not enable him immediately to see her in a paintable light, as he had hoped. And, though at first he spent a great deal of time reading the histories of heroic women from the Queen of the Amazons to Boadicea and on to fighting Queen Bess, not one of them set up in him any sympathetic fire like that which had blazed up in his mind two years earlier when he had read Goethe's poem about the distant Tasso.

Conscientiously when he was not reading he set himself exercises in drawing from life. He filled whole sketchbooks with chance figures that caught his fancy in the streets, a half-mad organ-grinder leaning back to balance his box-like

instrument, the lady at the Zoo whose soft small voice saying 'I always end with the serpents' had caught his attention, a devil-may-care girl leaning against a street-post cracking nuts between her teeth and tossing them at passing men. This last, he told himself, had attracted him only because of her unexpected air of liveliness and simplicity and had meant no more to him than any of the scores of other figures his pencil had caught.

But, as the weeks passed and the coming April and the Academy grew nearer while still nothing struck that reverberating chord that Goethe's 'Tasso' had once done for him, he grew rapidly more and more despondent. There were books still that he had earlier promised himself he would read but he found he lacked the energy to tackle them. The weather had become cold and this he saw as the reason he had abandoned his sketching. He took to spending occasional afternoons at his club, then he went there every afternoon and then every afternoon and most evenings. He knew he was wasting his time. He did not even greatly like the men he met at the club. Indeed, he had been on the point of resigning and if it had not been that his trustees had paid his subscription he would have done so long before. It was not the sort of place a painter, someone devoting himself heart and soul to his art, should have had time for.

But now he had time for it, and plenty. His skill on the billiard table grew immensely.

At last the day for his visit to Wiltshire arrived. With a sudden upward soaring of spirits he boarded the train. Elizabeth, in an hour or two he would see her. And that was what he needed, the inspiration of her presence. Once he saw her again he would be able to work his way to a knowledge of what it was he wanted to paint. It had been removal from her that had put the black mood of the past weeks on him. And that was to be expected when you loved

a woman and were deprived of any possibility of seeing her. As they thundered through the countryside, empty and dark under low cloud, the conviction grew in him that he was about to put an end to his troubles.

Was it too soon to talk to Sir Charles about marriage? It was not as though he were penniless, or that he depended even on his paint-brush for an income. His trustees would without doubt release his capital if he proposed to marry a person as suitable as Elizabeth. He could support her properly, provide a house, perhaps a carriage. And surely Lady Augusta at least had deliberately brought the two of them together as long ago as the night of her ball. Yes, at the first convenient opportunity he would talk to Sir Charles.

But the white fire of his rising spirits was damped abruptly enough. On getting out of the dogcart that had brought him from the station, Elizabeth, there in the hall of the big house to greet him, asked almost without preliminary in what setting it was that he was going to paint her.

He could only stammer out that he had not yet decided.

She looked at once disappointed.

‘You have brought what you need to begin the picture?’ she asked, not without a touch of sharpness.

‘Oh yes. Yes, indeed. My crayons are here, and my paints. The easel was too big for the dogcart. They are bringing it up later. It is simply that I have not yet chosen the subject for which you are to be model.’

‘But you have had so many weeks to choose.’

He had given her almost at the very start of their friendship the right to reprove him. He could hardly object now that she was exercising it.

But something of his sudden-struck sulkiness must have shown, because in an instant Elizabeth smiled at him.

‘No, forgive me,’ she said. ‘I ought not to have broached the subject so promptly on your arrival. And you must be

cold and hungry. But, to tell the truth, I have been pining here.'

Pining? Had he not too?

'I am sorry to hear it.'

'It is, once again, the delays that have come between what I want to do, what I am ready and more than ready to do, and the doing of it. Aunt Augusta is very kind, but she would not hear of it when I wanted to leave before Christmas.'

'You are ready to start now?'

'Of course. I have been ready since the end of October at least. I have found, thanks to Aunt Augusta, a companion to share rooms with. She has even found the rooms. They are in Gower Street. I could start work tomorrow. Can you wonder that I have pined?'

And I, Godfrey thought, have pined for precisely the opposite reason.

'So my painting you was to have served as an admirable distraction and you have been disappointed?'

He had meant it to sound sympathetic and it had sounded not a little bitter.

'No,' Elizabeth answered quickly. 'Not that. I will tell you how I had thought of your painting. It was to be a cannon.'

'A cannon?'

She laughed, more at the oddness of her choice of metaphor than at anything else.

'No, truly, that was the way I saw it. I felt that your putting on to canvas of myself as you saw me would be as if the cannon-shell, prepared these weeks past, was being aimed and fired. To shoot into the midst of the enemy.'

'And, alas,' Godfrey said, catching at last her mood of sympathetic gaiety, 'the artilleryman had yet to drag his piece into the firing-line.'

But very quickly, when he had left her, the current of misery set strongly in once more. All her lightness could not disguise the fact that he had failed her.

And in the days that followed the flow of misery did not abate. No notion of the rôle in which he would paint Elizabeth entered his head. He made excuses to her that in any case the days were too grey for him to work, and was glad that they were so. He entered with a somewhat over-hecktic enjoyment into the various entertainments the Bosworths offered, the dinner parties, the visits to neighbouring houses, the shooting parties, a mount with the Hunt. And instead of spending long hours talking with Elizabeth he played billiards.

So there was never any question of taking Sir Charles aside and solemnly discussing with him his prospects. And he left, sooner than he had meant to, only a couple of days after Christmas, before even Elizabeth was departing. As the country porter carried his big unwieldy easel, never once set up, along to the guard's van of the train, a thought stirred uneasily in his head. It was a thought he tried not to let come to the surface. Had he passed here in Wiltshire some high-water mark in his relationship with Elizabeth? Had the tide begun to turn? To run out?

Even when Elizabeth, within a very short time of her return to London, wrote and told him simply that she was now settled in at Gower Street the mood of misery that he had brought back with him from that Christmas did not alter. He went almost at once to visit her but with a settled heaviness.

Yet he felt after the landlady, a bustlingly clean and comfortable figure in white starched apron and white cap, had ushered him into Elizabeth's sitting-room that he ought to be full of delight for her. The rooms seemed to suit her so well. After barely a week's occupation they were already a

settled oasis of warm and ordered domesticity. A neat fire glowed and spluttered occasionally with flame in the grate. The hearth in front of it was swept and clean. Its brass fender glinted in the warm light. Round it were comfortable red armchairs, with behind one of them a heavy screen keeping out the winter draughts from the thickly curtained windows. The landlady soon brought in tea things which she set out on the red table-cover under the yellowy-warm glow of a tall brass lamp, putting a kettle on the hob of the fire where it gave out a tiny singing note. Everything was as neat as it could be and shining with polish.

Godfrey, while he was being introduced to Elizabeth's companion, a Miss Watkyn, a lady who had published two volumes of poems that had made a little stir, felt himself full of an aching desire to be truly part of the life that was being lived here. But as Miss Watkyn, a pale thin-featured person with a great mass of dark hair that made her look as if she were being continually harassed by a burden of fears, darted exclamations of enthusiasm at him—he was an artist: she too had her art—he knew that he was a visitor and he felt altogether like a visitor, an intruder.

He knew that, as things had gone between himself and Elizabeth in Wiltshire, and still seemed to be going, he was becoming every day in less and less of a position to ask her to let him occupy at some time the chair now dedicated to Miss Watkyn. But he ought soon to have been able to make that momentous request. The lines that they had both in the summer seemed to be travelling along should have been bringing them day by day, hour by hour, closer together. And he could feel now that they were not.

It was not Miss Watkyn's excess of enthusiasm at a chance mention of Garibaldi and his Redshirts, for all the fuss it created, that was keeping them apart now. It was that he was unable to extend to Elizabeth that secret stream of sympathy he ought to be putting out. He ought to be telling

her that he was ready to begin the picture she was to be his model for. Even in front of Miss Watkyn, whose peals of excited sympathy at any mention of the idea were perhaps best not encouraged, he ought to have been able to convey a hint. But he had nothing to say.

The very sight of Elizabeth now ought to have fired again his original impetus. She looked so much mistress of her small domain, in a grey silk dress that he had seen before, quiet, severely crisp, full-bosomed, its colour enhancing those grey eyes that shone now, he thought, more than ever when she was at last at the beginning of the work she had so long wanted to do. From all this he ought to have seized at once that one simple clear idea that would put both her and all she stood for on to canvas. But he had not.

Hence the platitudes from the newspapers such as the chance reference to Garibaldi that had so disastrously affected Miss Watkyn. He was not even able to produce the right enthusiasm for Elizabeth's accounts of the work she had already started on.

'I have one family only at present under my wing, and, though I visit them every day, I still have not really been able to decide how many of them there are, all living in this one small room. So many children appear, and all of them with thick matted hair, and all that hair a playground for the lice—'

Miss Watkyn gave a little shriek. Elizabeth continued unperturbed.

'I spend hours with the comb among them and when I think I have really finished the whole family another little creature appears with more hair overhanging its weak eyes and with the same ragged petticoat and ragged frock covering its thin little scab-covered body, and with the same legs black as a negro's from wading in the same inky kennel.'

'Don't you begin to despair?' Godfrey asked.

She flamed up at once at this.

'How can you ask? There cannot be any question of despair. It is a matter of driving on and on until the tiny area of cleanliness at last grows and spreads. You must know that.'

She looked at him with reproach. And he remembered how once she had praised him for his persistence. Well, he had persisted too with this elusive idea that had haunted him for months now. No wonder he had at last despaired.

But he had despaired. And it had cut him off from Elizabeth. It was as if she was in this room, in the simple warmth and order of it, and he was outside in the street, in the cutting hail-flecked January wind. He might be separated from her by only a thickness fine as the window-pane. But he was cut off as completely as any wandering crazy old organ-grinder or crutch-hobbling lame beggar who might chance to shamble along respectable Gower Street.

He knew that it needed only one firm push to break the fragile barrier. But it was a push he knew that he was totally unable to make.

So he left after a visit scarcely longer than a formal call, hailed a passing cab at the corner of Bedford Square and went straight to the club. Nor was he entirely displeased when the first person he set eyes on in the smoking-room proved to be Captain Harnett.

Captain Harnett was a man in many ways totally opposed to all that he himself stood for. Where he was serious, even too serious, Harnett was all self-indulgence. He was notorious in the club for the variety and extent of his sensual life, and for his willingness to talk of it. He was a man of about forty, no longer in the Army now that he had inherited. Younger men in the club hung about him and even went to him as a father confessor, especially since he boasted of never having been at all affected by disease however frequently he risked such affliction.

Seeing him now sitting alone in front of a somnolent fire, a long black cigar somewhat fiercely clamped in his mouth, his sharp-profiled mottled-complexioned face sombre in repose, Godfrey had felt a sudden urge to seek for once his company. There would be no confessions. The problem that he was faced with vis-à-vis Elizabeth was not one that Harnett would be even remotely capable of advising upon. It was simply that he felt obscurely that tonight the cynical seeing of the world as no more than a huge sexual market was perhaps the only view that he could bear.

But it seemed he was to get the kind of advice he scorned whether he would or not. Scarcely had he flung himself down in a chair and secured them both brandy-and-soda than Harnett gave him a long appraising look and a quick twisted smile.

‘You look sorry for yourself, my friend.’

‘Why, yes, I feel downcast. I hardly know why. Nothing that a drink won’t cure, I dare say.’

He took a long pull at his glass.

‘Drink has its uses,’ Harnett agreed, ‘though the cure’s apt to last only so long as the medicine’s taken. And a damned nasty taste’s left in the mouth next day.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘I’ll tell you what you want, my boy.’

Godfrey could hardly avoid asking what this was, though he suspected all too clearly what sort of an answer he would get.

‘A different woman, my lad. There’s not a lot in this world that a change of quim won’t mend. Take my word for it.’

Godfrey forced himself to smile.

‘I’ve no doubt you’re right.’

‘Then—’

Captain Harnett rose to his feet.

‘Then shall we be off, my dear fellow? The lupanars of the town await.’

‘I’m sorry, no,’ Godfrey said.

He had in a moment thought of all Harnett was promising: the Haymarket, with even on this cold night plenty of female company willing to share a bed often for no more than a guinea, the poses plastiques with women straining their imaginations to present themselves in lewd and yet lewder ways, the flash houses where nothing that the sexual urge in man contrived was a matter for shame. He had thought of his own one night of licence. And he had without hesitation decided against. It was not, he found, because of his objection to the supposed rule that any man must be willing to show himself a stallion at a moment’s notice. It was rather that he felt that Harnett’s view was altogether too simple, that it did not answer the question it seemed so easily to ask.

But Harnett was not disconcerted by his refusal. Equally he proposed that they should dine together at the club instead. And, as the evening progressed, Godfrey had to admit to himself that Harnett was good company. Though by the end of the evening he had created in Godfrey’s mind a vision, fundamentally terrible, of the happy-go-lucky pursuit of erotic pleasure—none the less reckless even though Harnett had apparently always escaped the penalty of disease—the telling of its incidents had been often extremely amusing.

At about eleven Harnett repeated his invitation to a joint pleasure raid on the resources of the capital and Godfrey again declined.

‘As you like, my dear fellow, though I must say I think you’re a bit of a fool.’

They took their hats from the servant who had helped them into their greatcoats. Outside it was clear and moonlit,

though the wind that had blown all the day was if anything even sharper. They looked about for a cab for Godfrey.

‘Hah, look there,’ Harnett exclaimed suddenly, pointing with his silver-headed cane to the distant street corner and the halo of frosty light from the gaslamp there.

‘A hansom?’

‘No, my dear fellow, better than that. A whore. And, if I mistake not, a creature I know, a girl of infinite resource. Can’t I persuade you to change your mind?’

‘No, I think not. Not even for the infinite—’

At that instant he recognised in his turn the distant beguiling figure in the gaslight.

It was Lisa. Surely it was her, though he had not set eyes on her since that night six months before. He found that a coursing excitement had sprung up in him at the sight of her. Or was it really her?

Would he accept Harnett’s offer after all? There would be no difficulty.

And evidently Harnett, with his extraordinary quickness to perceive sexual subtleties, had sensed something of what had passed through his mind.

‘Come, my dear chap, I’ll leave her to you. She’ll extend your experience, I promise you.’

‘No. No, I thank you.’

Godfrey was able to speak the words firmly, and found that he had meant them firmly. Let his position with Elizabeth be what it might, he would not go back to that world to escape from which he had invoked Elizabeth’s spirit.

Chapter Seven

Captain Harnett had promptly declared, without evident ill-will, that if Godfrey were 'not interested in the strumpet, then I'm damned if I don't have her myself'. And he had gone resolutely striding away down the street in the direction of the girl who was, or who might not be, Lisa. Godfrey had turned in the other direction towards a night cab stand, plunging his thoughts into the idea of Elizabeth as if he were holding his shrinking flesh to a cauterising iron.

There was a single empty four-wheeler at the stand, its horse occasionally stamping its feet in the cold and champing at its feed-bag. Godfrey went up to the vehicle and tapped smartly at the closed sash.

"Ullo," a sleep-thick voice answered from within. 'Is it a job?'

The dark figure of the cabbie, shrouded in a heavy old coat, his round hat jammed on his head even in slumber, began to rise up on the far side of the glass. And at that precise moment there clanged forth into Godfrey's mind with the majestic unexpectedness of the sun breaking goldenly through an unending sullen cloud curtain the idea of just how he would paint Elizabeth.

It was the thought of what Elizabeth had done for him just a few moments earlier that gave it to him, complete and entire except for one irritating lacuna in his factual knowledge.

And that, he realised, might be remedied at once. He swung away from the cab and actually ran along the street back towards the club, hearing faintly in the moonlight the cabbie's curses of bleak rage. Inside the club, he brushed aside the servant who wanted to take his coat and bounded up the stairs two at a time, hat still on his head, to the library.

At this hour that room, never much used in this establishment, was deserted except for a solitary elderly member soundly dozing under a single wall gaslight in front of a dully dying fire.

Godfrey paused at the door for a moment. Surely he had seen at some time Lemprière's *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* somewhere on the shelves. But where? He thought hard and then decided he knew. He hurried over. But in the dim light he could not read a single title. He strode across to the writing-table, seized a sheet of paper, folded it into a spill and went to light it at the gas.

The dozing old member stirred. 'Waiter,' he mumbled. 'Potash-water.' And then he fell asleep again.

Godfrey carefully carried his flaming spill back to the shelves where he had thought that the worthy Channel Island clergyman's compilation might be. And in the last flicker of his improvised torch he saw it. He hurried with it back to the light.

Venus, Venus. Ah, here she was. Venus also surnamed Cytheraea. No. Venus Exopolis, so named because her statue was without the city of Athens. Venus Phallommeda named from her affection for the phallus. Good heavens, no. And, ah, yes, here.

Venus Verticordia, named thus because she could turn the hearts of men to cultivate chastity.

And was this not Elizabeth? Was this not what she had done for him, turned him from vice. Was this not an extension of her battle to bring light into dark places, this bringing of purity to all that was foul? She should be Venus Verticordia. She was Venus Verticordia. And now he could paint her.

Even the weather entered into his scheme of things in the joyous rush of the days and weeks that followed. There came a spell of a fortnight and more when day after day the

sky was clear. If ever there was good light in winter, it was now. And Godfrey made the very fullest use of it.

There had been first that marvellous next morning when he had gone to see Elizabeth, locating with difficulty some tumbledown houses called Perkins Rents in a rookery crouching under the very shadow of Westminster Abbey, coming suddenly from grey tranquillity into close-packed airlessness and seeing Elizabeth teaching a tattered hare-lipped girl of ten or so to use a scrubbing brush. For a little he had stood and watched her in the entrance of the court, with his coat-tails held up round his waist to prevent them dipping into a broken basket of stinking herrings which a man crouching in the slight shelter of the entrance archway was trying feebly to sell. At last he had felt he could fairly interrupt the scrubbing lesson and he had approached.

And then, pacing with care beside her up and down the cramped space of that icy-puddled unpaved court, he had explained just how it was that at last he wanted to paint her. And she had at once been infected with his enthusiasm and had agreed. She had even abandoned her intention of attending a meeting that afternoon so that she could pose for the preliminary study.

That had gone well, too. She had evoked such an excess of clumsy admiration from young Billy as he had shown her up to the studio that he had wondered whether he would ever get a coherent word out of him again. And in the studio she had turned this way and that to the light, had moved her head up and down, had put her arms here and there with wonderful patience. She had even draped a sheet over her dress for him to get some idea of how the draperies would fall, and far from complaining she had been eager to do any more he thought necessary. At the end of two hours he had sketched the whole outline of the picture on to the large sheet of brown paper that he always used at this stage. Already he could see the finished work as he hoped it

would be, an intense vision if vague of detail and, he was convinced, bound to be as far superior to the Torquato Tasso as that had been to any of his earlier trial pieces.

In the weeks that followed he lived oblivious of anything but the work. And this not because he had much less time than he would have liked before the Academy but because of the passion that filled him. When each afternoon the light began to fail and he had to send home the professional model he used at this stage he would continue to stand in front of his easel staring at the chalk-marked brown paper until the very shapes on it disappeared in the gloom. And eating or sitting or taking himself bemusedly off to bed he did nothing but ponder the vision that hung like a bright cloud in the centre of his mind.

His only other activity was to visit Elizabeth, though it would be long before he would need her again for the picture. But he felt now on a sure footing in Gower Street and he knew that in every moment he spent there he was absorbing his inspiration into his system.

They were back in their relations where they had been before she had left to go down to Wiltshire. There could be no question of that. Even the enthusiasm of Miss Watkyn over the proposed work—she had demanded to know all about it, and Godfrey despite his instinct never to discuss an unpainted picture had had to make some concessions to her fervid interest—could not hamper the way the two of them grew, meeting by meeting, closer together.

The days went spinningly by. Each one was marked for him by a minute or two of extra light to work by. And each week was marked by a distinct progress in the task on the easel. The figure drawn from the model being finished, the background progressing stage by stage, the moving on from chalk to oil colours, the transfer painstakingly of the work on paper to the carefully squared-off canvas.

And how secure he felt. For the first time he tolerated the presence in the studio of a model without the least qualm. When he had been working on the Torquato Tasso and various girls had at various times been there for long periods, though he had never stepped beyond the most formal politeness with them, he had always experienced an intense disturbance, a fear not only of the effects of their possible promiscuity but, more, of the world he suspected some of them at least inhabited, the world that both attracted and repelled. But now, armoured in Elizabeth's radiance, the particular girl he employed, a statuesque but vain and incredibly talkative creature, might for all the effect she had on him have been a plaster cast.

Even when one day, despite his wearied requests for less chatter, she had told him with the utmost relish that she had been to a party 'with ever such a lot of artists—just like you—well, with quite a dozen' where the entire company had taken off all their clothes still he had been able to regard her completely in the light of some talking doll, irritating but unconnected in any way with the reality of life.

And soon he came to spend each evening with Elizabeth, leaving Gillingham Place when the light went and staying in the comfort, warmth and orderliness of Gower Street until it was time to go back to bed. Often they would sit hardly talking at all. Miss Watkyn would, with frequent deep sighs, read to herself from some volume of verse, Elizabeth would have on her reading-stand a fat Blue Book and he himself would sit idling over the newspaper and taking long looks at his muse when he thought he was unobserved.

It was on one such quiet evening, shortly after they had heard that Sir Charles and Lady Augusta were back in Brook Street for the spring, that he was able to register that his relations with Elizabeth had taken a marked step forward. It was a registration made on the acutely sensitive barometer of Miss Watkyn's feelings. And it blew up like a sudden

squall too, one that set the indicator swinging in a moment from 'Set Fair' to 'Stormy'.

All that precipitated it was a quiet remark from Elizabeth.

'I had no idea that Blue Books and Statistical Tables grew quite so prolifically,' she said, as she laid down a thick unbound volume she had just finished. 'When I leave here I shall have to have a room with library shelves.'

Godfrey might not even have noticed the implications had Miss Watkyn not started out of her chair as if a spectre had appeared greenish and dripping in the middle of the neatly warm room.

'Leave?' she exclaimed. 'Leave here? Leave me? No, no. You cannot.'

And she had fallen heavily back in her chair.

Naturally there had been a certain amount of to-do. Smelling-salts, always by Miss Watkyn's side, had had to be applied, a gushing fit of tears had had to be ignored by Godfrey and treated with a touch of sharpness by Elizabeth and finally Miss Watkyn had had to be assisted up to her darkened room.

Then, while he waited for Elizabeth to return—and Miss Watkyn of course kept her a considerable time—he began thinking about what had caused all the furore. And he saw quickly enough that Miss Watkyn had been right, in a way, to display such feeling. Because what Elizabeth had been doing was to imply that in some within-sight future she would be in her own home. Or rather in a home shared with a husband. She had been seeing herself as married to him and had un-consciously referred to their future state.

His heart bounded.

And then, not many days later, he received an invitation from Sir Charles and Lady Augusta to join them at the opera and learnt that evening from Elizabeth that she too had been asked. She had even deferred replying until she knew whether he was to be of the party.

With a deep-buried song of triumph beginning to sound somewhere within him, he suggested to Elizabeth that a break in their unvarying patterns of work would be an excellent thing. And he resolved that on that night he would find the right circumstances in which to ask Elizabeth to be his wife.

Godfrey arrived at the Opera with Elizabeth, Lady Augusta and Sir Charles in the Bosworth barouche. He arrived hugging to himself the knowledge that he had planned before they left Brook Street to have a confidential quarter of an hour with Sir Charles and ask him, as Elizabeth's nearest relation, for her hand and that he had done just what he had planned.

'My boy, Augusta told me long ago that this was in the wind. Indeed, damn me if I don't think she put it in the wind, so to speak. But I can't tell you how glad I am. Elizabeth's a diffie—Well, you know, there was that medical business and everything. And then all this non— All this business with the—What the devil is it? The London Society for Sanitation and the Poor? Something like that. Well, I felt responsible for the child. Well, not a child. Not a child at all in many ways. No, what I mean is, my dear fellow, that you'll make the best possible husband for her. No need to ask you any questions, keeping her and all that. Known all about you since you were in frocks. My boy, I'm delighted. Delighted.'

And later tonight he would order circumstances equally firmly in creating the opportunity to ask Elizabeth the question he felt certain hardly needed to be put.

Ahead of them, as they sat in the carriage in the dark, stretched the long slow line of other arrivals.

'It reminds me of the Park,' Elizabeth contrived to say to Godfrey at a time when neither Sir Charles nor Lady Augusta would hear.

Godfrey gave her a grin.

‘And that is no indication of intense delight?’

‘Well, do you know,’ Elizabeth answered in the same quiet tone, ‘my aunt said to me earlier that the Italian opera in London is the best and highest paid in Europe, and I do not doubt it. But all the same I would give a lot at this moment to be quietly at my own fireside with a Select Committee Report on my reading-stand.’

Godfrey, full of sheer pride in what he had asked Sir Charles not an hour before, laughed at her.

‘No,’ he said, ‘this once you must enjoy yourself. And Lady Augusta is right, the opera is something noble in its way, a flower of our civilisation.’

‘Well then,’ Elizabeth said, smiling at him, ‘not because it is a flower of a civilisation that I know well to be built on mud, but because you are ready to enjoy it I will.’

The barouche came to a halt outside the high portico of the massive theatre. The two tall Bosworth footmen leapt from their places behind and stood on either side of the door, and they descended to join the rapidly thickening crowd of operagoers. All around the men, every one in swallow-tailed evening coat with high white choker at the neck and high crushable hat on the head, seemed tall and magnificent. And the women, with their bare shoulders covered at present with opera cloaks, wraps and shawls, each striving to outdo the others in brilliance of colour, with their long dresses, their jewels, their fans and their bouquets—Godfrey glimpsed Lady Emmeline Otway, busy with a bouquet holder incorporating a little mirror so that she could see who was approaching her from behind—all really seemed too gorgeously fine to be mere human creatures.

Inside, as they made their way to their box, the crush was yet denser. The air was heavy with rich mingling perfumes, loud with talk and laughter.

‘Come,’ Godfrey whispered to Elizabeth as they followed Sir Charles and Lady Augusta up the thickly carpeted staircases, ‘admit that this is a spectacle worth the seeing? Worth the sharing even?’

Elizabeth’s grey eyes were shining with an excited sparkle he thought he had never yet seen in them.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Yes, I sink my principles for tonight and agree this is truly fine.’

She gave him a suddenly impish smile.

‘Though that it’s finer than the opera in New York I will not say,’ she added. ‘Especially since I was never there.’

From their box among the many tiers of boxes all round the great theatre they looked down at the stalls, now very nearly filled, a pattern almost of alternate black and colour, men and women, with the pinky-white bare shoulders of the latter making a consistent irregular thread all along each row.

‘Elizabeth, my dear,’ said Lady Augusta, ‘take these glasses. After all, when one comes to the theatre to see people and be seen by them, one might as well see properly.’

Elizabeth laughed.

‘What, Aunt Augusta, you’re not here to listen to the music?’

‘I would like to say that I am not, child. But, to tell the truth, I find the music takes me up into regions I really almost prefer not to go to. So I warn you, no chatter after the maestro raises his baton.’

Sir Charles leant forward, his skull under the hair brushed across it pink-fleshed already from the heat.

‘The trouble is,’ he said, ‘that she even likes this terrible Verdi fellow we’re to hear. Now, if it’s Meyerbeer and his what-do-you-call-it, Robert the Devil, then I’m perfectly ready to be carried away myself. But all these brassy

roarings, all the tink-lings and cymballings ... Oh, dear, oh dear.'

'Well, I know nothing of *Ballo in Maschera*,' Godfrey replied, glancing at the programme.

'Oh,' said Sir Charles, 'it's the greatest nonsense of them all. Though Elizabeth should like it: it purports to take place in America.'

'I don't recall America as being particularly rich in masked balls,' Elizabeth said.

And in a flash, while Sir Charles explained the curious history of Verdi's opera to Elizabeth, how it had originally been the story of the assassination of King Gustav of Sweden but how after Orsini's attempt on Napoleon III the authorities in Rome had forbidden the subject of the mortality of kings and so the whole intrigue had been bodily removed to Boston where only an English governor's life was at stake, Godfrey was transported, simply by hearing the words of the title said in English, to a vivid remembrance of the masked balls he himself had once visited.

The balls, at places like the Holborn Casino, the Grecian Saloon, Vauxhall and Drury Lane, had exercised on him a powerful attraction in the period between his coming back to England from Germany and his first meeting Elizabeth. At such popular entertainments it was wonderfully easy to step across into the world on the other side. A trifling sum for admission and one was there. A moment before a passer-by in the street going about one's lawful business: a moment afterwards a participant in the life that goes on underneath, cut off completely from the edifice of morality and order generally presented as the way the world runs. In a realm ruleless, rank, rich.

Not that, on the five or six occasions that he had availed himself of this freedom, he had ever taken full advantage of the possibilities that so plainly lay there. Something had

deterred him, a fear hard to define. But each time he had danced with some dozen different girls in the course of a couple of hours, had smelt the cheap scent some of them wore and their breaths whiffy with beer or gin, had felt their sweaty hands holding tight on to his, had found answers of a sort to their gay loud talk. And had felt that he was there, touching that other world.

And—it was this that had given such occasions in retrospect a deeper-stringed power to tug at the furthest places in his mind—when Lisa had mentioned that it was at masked balls among other resorts that she had learnt her trade he had attached to those surface experiences that one night he had spent with her, that night which, for all that he tried to swathe it in oblivion, kept its niche in his memory, encased and indestructible. So one casual mention of the English of the title of the opera they were about to hear had set off in his head such a rout of confused memories and intimations that he had for some few minutes been unable to realise at all what was going on around him.

But now he pulled himself sharply together. What nonsense was it he had let invade his head? He was here at the opera with Elizabeth, whom he intended to make his wife, and with Sir Charles and Lady Augusta who stood towards her as parents. He was here to listen to a piece of high-reaching music, to take part in a civilised entertainment, at the end of which he had promised himself he would ask a question whose answer would affect the whole of the rest of his life. He had no business to be thinking of anything else but this present moment and its pledged aftermath.

He wrested his attention back to the scene in front of him. Soon the overture began and for a little he was able to hold his mind to it. But, though he had hoped it would be music that carried him away on its airy wings, as music often had

done for him in the opera houses of Germany, he found before long that this piece was not holding him.

He stole a look at Elizabeth. Was the music working for her? She certainly seemed rapt enough, eyes fixed on the lighted oblong of the orchestra pit below them. Lady Augusta, he saw with a flick of amusement, was being as good as her word. Plainly the abrupt heights and depths of this music touched something inside that tubby but magnificent exterior and bore her off to far unimagined regions. Sir Charles, on the other hand, was sitting bolt upright with the look of someone swallowing a medicinal draught.

The curtain rose and the curious drama began to unfold with its story—surely more or less taken from history?—of the benevolent despot King Gustav plotted against by high-principled anti-liberals, or, following its enforced change of setting, its tale of the unlikely Ricardo, Count of Warwick, Governor of Boston, and of the improbable conspirator negroes, Samuele and Tomaso, with the addition for reasons no doubt chiefly musical of the tights-and-doublet page Oscar, undeniably feminine as to the hips and an agile soprano. It did not compel his attention.

Nor was he held by the subsequent antics at the hut of Ulrica the sorceress, the dodgings behind a convenient curtain, the overheard conversations bawled out at the singers' full stretch of lung. What possible relation did all this bear to real life? Very well, it provided excuses for some extremely dramatic music. But surely this was not enough? Was this Signor Giuseppi Verdi in Italy really doing in his art something parallel to what he himself believed he was attempting in paint? It did not seem that these unlikely cavortings could hold any similar relation to any truth as his own version of Torquato Tasso leaving Ferrara did to the idea of casting aside the complexities of the world to seek a

higher way. Or to the conception of Elizabeth as Venus Verticordia, turner of—

And then suddenly, through the clumsy illusion down on the stage of a pair of deep-toned basses made up to look like a couple of Christy Minstrels, of the heroine arriving from a ride through the wild night countryside immaculate in pearls and white satin, suddenly there came a lightning flash of insight. The dark and this supposedly tumbledown hut, what were they but that dark side of life that had come so insistently into his mind with the thought of the Holborn Casino, the Grecian Saloon and the like? And plainly this darkness—were they not even now singing themselves a rendezvous for the midnight gallows?—had its attraction for Giuseppe Verdi, every bit as powerful as the attraction he himself had felt for the dark streets and darker places of London.

So in the next act, at the gallows, though the events there were if anything even more ridiculous and unlikely, he found himself almost wholly absorbed. For all his occasional desire to giggle, when bouquets pattered down at the foot of the gibbet in tribute to the diva, when her supposed husband entirely failed to recognise her because she had lightly flung a black scarf over the lower half of her face, when the conspirators, all in black cloaks, masks and black gloves for secrecy, brandished their poniards with a recklessness worthy of so many hucksters in a street-market and sang like billy-oh all the while, he still moved in the dark world. For all the rest of that improbable act he lived in that world he had watched in fascination, had dipped his wings over as if it were black scum-water with a sense of breathless pleasure.

The tale of the good King Gustav, or good Governor Ricardo Warwick, entered its final act, the masked ball itself. And, though clearly for the singers this was simply an opportunity to display the most sumptuous costumes they

could persuade the management to provide, yet the presence of all those tiny masks over the eyes, a little mocking note running through all the finery, enflamed him to an altogether new pitch. Masks, the extraordinary anonymity they conferred. Masks, little slips of passports out of the land of rules and regulations, order and hierarchies, into the land of disorder, darkness and new rules that were no rules.

As the heavy curtains swung together for the last time, amid the frenzied applause and yet more showered bouquets, amid the bowings and smiles, amid 'Bravo' and 'Encore', he leant over to Lady Augusta.

'I'm sorry to say that I'm not feeling well,' he mouthed to her above the noise. 'With your permission I shall slip away to bed. Don't let Elizabeth worry. I shall be better again in the morning.'

Chapter Eight

Godfrey ran out of the theatre while they were still applauding the singers and while the great ornate staircases, the crush bar and the foyer were empty of all but a few liveried footmen. Outside in the sudden darkness and chill of the March night he slipped through the waiting rank of carriages and found a hansom.

'The Casino de Venise, Holborn,' he shouted to the driver and hoisted himself all in a tumble into the seat.

Why, why did I do it, he asked himself. Why? Why? Why? I ought at this moment to be escorting Elizabeth out of that cursed theatre, helping her into the Bosworths' barouche, going back to Brook Street with her, finding myself adroitly left alone with her and asking her to marry me.

He swung forward on the well-padded seat of the cab and buried his face in his hands.

He almost turned to the hatch in the roof above him, opened it and called to the driver to go after all to Brook Street.

But he had persuaded Lady Augusta, and with diabolical cunning, that he was feeling unwell. And in any case he did not mean to go back to Brook Street. He meant to go to the masked ball in Holborn and plunge into its delights. He meant to follow whatever thread he got his hands on to there to the end, no matter how deep it took him.

He would do it. He would not let another hour of his life go by without tasting that world he had dipped and dipped at like a swallow. He needed to know it. He needed that first of all, and afterwards there could come the deluge and he would snatch from it what he could.

The cab drew up outside the garish front of the Casino de Venise, great glowing gas-globes proclaiming it to the world. He paid off the driver, leapt down, braved the small knot of

costermongers lounging there and entertaining themselves by shouting coarse witticisms and entered.

At the ticket-window he proffered his shilling as eagerly as if it were a handful of golden sovereigns that was to buy him the rarest of pleasures. He obtained too, for the sum of four-pence, a mask, but after a moment's hesitation rejected any further disguise because even the short time needed to don it would keep him away too long from the moment of plunging.

Perhaps with the payment of his shilling the die had been cast. Even perhaps it had been cast with his falsehood to Lady Augusta. But he felt that until he had entered the huge ballroom itself, had confronted other masked figures, it would not be done. And he wished passionately to be past the point of return.

Almost at a run he went through the ornate arch leading into the ballroom. And then there it was. He was in it. The ruleless black world had closed in above his head. The masked opposites confronted him and were there for the joining.

It was a scene in its way to rival the splendours of the Opera, less tasteful, more garish, almost as opulent. The huge room, rich in marble and gilt, blazed and glittered with light. There must have been as many as a full hundred chandeliers hanging from the high painted ceiling. At the far end a big band with fifty musicians at least, outnumbering the Opera orchestra, pooped and ta-rah-ed with noisy gusto. Tables round the walls were white-clothed and thick with wineglasses, tumblers of bitter beer, soda-water bottles. And in the middle was the dancing.

A quadrille was in progress. The dancers, varying wildly in costume, were moving in and out of the figures with noisy stamping enjoyment. A splendid statuesque brunette led them, dressed as a shepherdess but with a bodice cut lower far than any shepherdess would ever have worn and

adorned too with scintillating jewels that, if they did nothing to enhance her authenticity, gave her an eye-catching brilliance and sparkle.

And the dancers, the masked dancers, how good to see they were. How lively. How free. Shepherdesses, flower-girls, haymakers and the sailors who, though in trousers and masked, left no doubt of their femininity. And, linking arms with them, approaching and parting, the men, a more motley lot, how vigorous and carefree they were, the fantasy masks, the snouted pigs, the monster noses, the huge false moustaches, and the characters, the Henry VIIIs by the score, the Charles IIs and Cardinal Wolseys in dozens, the Highlanders, monks and Australian diggers. To and fro in the dance they went, snatching hugs, seizing kisses, shouting, laughing, losing their place and the time, reeling out of the figures, barging back in.

Godfrey stood there long enough to take it all in. How different, how utterly different this was to the last night of dancing he had had, the sedate and decorous parade of Lady Augusta's ball.

And then he plunged forward to join in. In a moment he had found or forced a sort of place for himself in the dance. A masked girl in the guise of a haymaker, with simply a straw hat on her head secured with a large green handkerchief and a mock smock of cheap muslin over her dress, seized him by both hands, bounced with him for a series of steps, smiled at him with total frankness, leapt and hopped at him.

'You ain't got much of a fancy-dress,' she shouted.

'I was in too great a hurry to meet you,' Godfrey shouted back.

'Then you'll have to catch me.'

And the dance took her whirling away.

But other girls presented themselves. And danced and parted.

'You're a gentleman,' declared one, when Godfrey gasped out a few words to her in the swing of a wild galop. 'I allus fancied a gentleman.'

'Then you shall have one. But what are you, you pretty little shepherdess?'

'Lor, sir, I'm an envelope-folder.'

'Indeed.'

Under her mask, swinging and swaying in the dance, she looked at him with a bold defiance.

'You know what they say about us envelope-folders?'

'Nothing bad, I'm sure.'

She laughed, loudly as a donkey.

'Oh, yes, but they does. That's the whole on it. They pays us ninepence a day and they says what they likes about us.'

Godfrey, breathing and panting as he danced, persisted in his gentleman-style gallantry.

'I'm sure whatever they say's undeserved.'

'No, t'ain't. You ninny.'

And with one look of thwarted contempt she broke from his grasp and ran spinning across the wide ballroom.

Godfrey was left standing, feeling a fool, and, he supposed, looking one, stock still at the edge of the whirling round of prancing blundering figures. He walked away.

Yes, the girl was right. What was he doing turning neat little politenesses here? For all the eagerness with which he had plunged into this fray, he was not of it.

For a moment he contemplated leaving. He pulled out his watch. It was still not very long after midnight. A fast hansom through the empty streets now and he might perhaps get to Brook Street before they retired. Some excuses. Any. And then he could be having that tête-à-tête with Elizabeth that was to have been the crown of this day.

But no. No, if he did not take all of this here into him now, then he would have it as a rebuke within him as long as he

lived.

He swung round and confronted the dance again. It was a wild mad polka now. What about one of those sailors? Those boy-girls? Had he not avoided them when he was on the floor before? Had he not feared a little that much freedom?

He would not any more. One of the sailors. Now. Or that girl over there in the uniform of a Volunteer? When he had first glimpsed her tall cock-feather-plumed hat across the other side of the big hall he had thought that she was really a Volunteer. And then she had danced by not very far off and, because she had had her back to him, he had seen that, slim though she was, she was no man. But there was something in her assumed man-like swagger, in that close-fitting blue jacket and those tight buff pantaloons, a sharp gaiety, that from right across the far side of the room called to him.

Yes, the Volunteer.

And damned be any fellow who was dancing with her now.

He started out across the floor, realised that in the mass of hopping swaying dancers he would never reach her, backed away and made a path for himself through the watchers standing round the walls, all the while keeping his eye on the tall plumed military hat as it bounced and leapt to the polka steps.

The Volunteer.

And then—Then, as she swung round in the arms of her partner and he saw her face clearly for the first time, he knew that, mask or no mask, she was Lisa.

There could be no doubt of it, although her features had been visible to him for only a second or two in the swing of the dance. There was that blade-sharp nose of old with the hooked bend in it, the crookedy mouth and, falling oddly from the tall Volunteer's cap, the dark straight and unabundant hair. It was Lisa.

Now he threw himself through the jostling buffeting dancers to come to her. He saw as he got nearer that the man she was dancing with, a dark fellow with a grinning wide-jawed dog mask, was wearing under his hired smock the fluffy yellow flannel jacket of a carpenter. Well, the like of him would scarcely be able to afford the pleasure of Lisa.

He came up behind him, reached out and tapped him in a friendly way on the shoulder as he swung clumsily along with Lisa in his arms.

‘Excuse me, my friend,’ he said in his ear, ‘but I’d dearly like to enlist alongside your soldier friend.’

But the dog-masked carpenter did not yield her.

‘Ay, and I like her myself,’ he flung out.

‘I’m glad you do,’ Godfrey said, half-running to keep up with the pair of them in the swirl of the polka. ‘But I want her, my good friend.’

He was beginning to feel silly. If this fellow simply stayed as he was, it would mean a tussle or abandoning Lisa. And, for all the free-and-easy way in which the dancing was conducted, he had seen no fighting anywhere and suspected that it was quickly pounced upon.

Should he offer money? Probably not. The fellow had spoken with a decidedly independent air.

‘Lisa, Lisa,’ he tried calling across the carpenter’s broad shoulder. Lisa did then look at him from under the peak of her tall cap, the thin black strip of her mask considering him.

‘Lisa, do you recognise me?’ he called breathlessly, tearing off his own mask.

For several bouncing steps of the dance she did not reply. He ran along behind the broad-shouldered carpenter and peered at her anxiously. At last she answered.

‘Why, yes. You’re the gentleman I found in the gutter one night last summer.’

‘I am. I am. Oh, Lisa, stop. I must speak with you.’

Would she respond to his plea?

Suddenly she plucked the carpenter's broad red hands off her waist.

'Joey,' she said to him, 'be a good chap. Dance with some other girl.'

'And you the smartest of them all,' the carpenter answered, trying to put his hands back.

But when she gave him a smile and removed the hands once more he bounced good-humouredly away under his grinning dog-mask and in a moment had secured himself a pretty flower-girl and was whirling onwards.

'Joey?' Godfrey said to Lisa, as she stepped aside from the polka swirl and stood facing him. 'Joey? So you know his name then under the mask?'

'Sure, I do. Joey comes here with me whenever I'm not busy with a flat and he's got the mint-sauce for the entrance fee.'

'Which I suppose is not so often? If he's the carpenter I took him for?'

'Oh, he works regular. He doesn't do so badly. But you? How are you for all this time?'

'I'm well. Well.'

'And have you never been down the Haymarket of a night that I haven't seen you?'

He thought of why it was that he had not.

'No. No, I've not been that way. I've ... But, no matter, I've found you again now.'

'You wanted me?'

'From the moment I realised who it was under that Volunteer's—No. No, I've wanted you ever since I parted from you that night.'

Lisa laughed.

'Then why didn't you come looking for me? I'm there always. And ready always.'

She had set herself up in rooms of her own in Blue Cross Street just south of Leicester Square since the previous summer, having, as she said to Godfrey, 'had a piece or two of luck.' They were a sitting-room and a bedroom separated by a pair of folding doors and furnished rather more handsomely than the room he remembered off Coventry Street. The house appeared to belong to a huge old fat woman called by everybody Mother Merewether who spent all her days and nights, so far as Godfrey could make out, in a sprawling armchair in the room next to the front door, drinking continually from a bottle of cheap fiery sherry from which she would treat the girls who rented rooms from her when she felt well disposed towards them.

No sooner had Lisa shut the door than they were back at once to their old footing. She would not lie naked on top of the bed as they had done the time before because the fire in the sitting-room had died almost to extinction in her absence. But this did not seem at all to matter and within minutes he was experiencing again those mind-annihilating sensations of old. Then everything was blotted out, who he was, what he meant to do with his life, all hopes, all fears, the events of the day past, Elizabeth, everything. And instead there were the huge moving forms, the tidal waves of colour, a primeval life. A night without time.

It was in fact as late as ten next morning when he re-entered the world again. Then Lisa sent out for breakfast from a nearby restaurateur's. When it was eaten, Godfrey looked at her, sitting there in chemise only at the table which the chambermaid had placed in front of the now relit and brightly burning fire.

'May I stay here?' he asked simply and suddenly.

Lisa smiled across at him, that crooked-mouth smile that ought to have been only cynical but which had in it always a lacing of warmth.

‘Why shouldn’t you stay?’ she said. ‘These days I don’t have anybody till the evening generally and you’re welcome to be here. And you can stay on in the evening and all night too, only you must pay me.’

‘I will. I will.’

So he spent the day there, lounging in shirt and trousers, with Lisa, who had gone out for a little to visit some shops, sitting beside him still in her silk stockings and boots but with only a blue satin dressing-gown otherwise. They sprawled on the big red sofa drawn up to the fire and smoked, looked at the newspapers, played a game or two of cribbage and chatted lazily about the pleasures of London, the music-halls that Lisa had loved ever since as hardly more than a child she had started going to the penny gaffs, the day of the Boat Race which had always been a holiday for her, a chance to mingle with huge excited crowds, to cheer for any reason or none, and Derby Day, a treat yet in store for her she said and another of London’s rare carnivals.

They made love on the big sofa too and then sent out for luncheon, devilled kidneys and potatoes maître d’hôtel and a bottle of claret. This was an incursion of the outside world, however, that did for some minutes remind Godfrey of what it was that he was doing. But it lasted only long enough for the writing of two hasty sick-bed scrawls to Lady Augusta and Elizabeth. And then, since the fire had been banked high all day and the whole set of rooms was now pleasantly warm, at Lisa’s suggestion they abandoned the sofa for the wider territory of the bed. And now she pulled away all the covers and before she took off her blue satin dressing-gown she dragged from the corner a tall cheval-glass and positioned it with care at just the best angle to show them, as they would lie on the wide stretch of the linen sheet, white and inviting if not unsoiled, their two selves. And soon in the poised glass it was moving limbs, tense breasts,

thrusting buttocks and such a surplus of delight that Godfrey thought more than once that he was on the point of thundering into unconsciousness.

In the evening they went to dine at the Café de l'Europe. Its clientèle of well-dressed handsome women of the town and their admirers Godfrey found wonderfully sympathetic, an extension out into the world of the private rule-banished existence he had led for almost twenty-four hours. But he chose a compartment well to the back of the big restaurant.

They ate lobster and drank champagne, as they had done at their first supper together in much more constrained circumstances.

And then, hurrying a little at the prospect of being secure once more in the little universe of those two rooms, he took her back. And, paying only the scantiest attention to Mother Merewether's greeting, they ran together up the stairs with the fat old creature's hoarse voice floating up after them, 'That's the way, that's the way, can't wait to fetch each other, can't wait.' And then there came again the procession of dim-moving forces, the territory of the instincts, meeting, blending, expanding.

And sleep.

And waking. Godfrey to find Lisa tickling the rim of his ear with the pointed nail of one finger.

The gas-burner was still on and he lay there on the wide soft bed, happy to be no more than just conscious of what was there waiting from him, half an hour away, perhaps an hour, slowly to be reached. Then Lisa began to whisper to him.

She whispered obscenities. It was the first time she had done so with him. It was the first time, indeed, that he had heard any woman talk bawdy. It was the first time, to tell the truth, that he had at all heard some of the things she said.

And it seemed to mark the opening out of a new land to him, a land which his maps had not even marked. A place rich with stored delights to be tapped from strange growths. It was a new world and the thought that he had suddenly landed on its shores was to him power and glory.

With a sense of shriven daring he ventured a contribution of his own. And his heart thumped when Lisa gave a warm snicker of laughter. He had found a new possibility of arousal, and like a stallion made free of broad untouched pastures he roamed and he romped there.

Once he saw that dawn had broken and the tall brown rectangles of the window blinds had light behind them. Otherwise the night was all a long tumultuous road, sometimes rich coloured, sometimes dark in sleep. And at the end there was a late waking and foolishly he attempted to set off once again, despite detecting a faint aching in the genital area, for the regions of elemental delight.

Then he found that he could not, that Lisa only half wanted to and that ashy bitterness also lay on the road.

Abruptly he sat up, slid down off the bed and, without even stopping to wash himself, put on his clothes. His temples were starting slowly to pound with the beginnings of a headache, the dull painful feeling in his sexual organs seemed to be spreading up into his stomach and all along his spine. He felt ready to lash out in temper at the least triggering-off.

He took pleasure in counting out the sovereigns, ten of them for the two nights, a high rate, and piling them above the dead grate in the sitting-room. As he did so he felt Lisa's eyes on him, through the opened double-doors, from where she continued to lie on the sheet-ruckled, sheet-fouled bed.

'Well, goodbye,' he said tersely.

'You've had too much of it,' she commented equably. 'But don't take it to heart. Everybody needs a rest some time. Come back tonight. I won't go out.'

‘Please don’t stay in for my sake,’ he answered. ‘You have your living to earn. Go out.’

Lisa gave a little giggle at this, not very full of life, as if she too was pretty much satiated. But it was a giggle nevertheless, and with a trickle of malice in it.

‘Oh dear me,’ she said. ‘I don’t go out as if I was a copying-clerk only who’d lose his situation if he wasn’t at his desk on the stroke of seven each day. I’ll be here if you want me again.’

‘Goodbye,’ Godfrey said.

And on that cold note he left.

Chapter Nine

But he did go back. And early in the evening of that same day too. It had been a miserable intervening period. He had reached home longing only for a bath in water as hot as his slummocky Billy could be badgered into getting. And the boy had said that the fire in the kitchen range had gone out and had been cursed more sharply than he ever had been before, had in consequence snivelled so much and laid the new fire so badly that it too had gone out and there had been in the end a wait of two full hours before any sort of heated water had been ready. And during that time what else had there been to do but sit, in the crumpled clothes in which he had set out for the Opera two days before, and stare at the heavy easel that dominated the studio with the nude figure of his model painted on it in the warm monochrome he used while his studies for the draperies that were to cover her lay scattered round on their brown-paper sheets.

He had not been able to see, sitting gloomily there, how the whole picture would ever be ready for the Academy. And, suppress the thought how he might, he had not been other than grimly aware that the picture was merely a symbol for Elizabeth herself. Sooner or later he would have to think of her, properly to think, not fob off her possible attentions with hurried lying notes.

His headache by then was steady and fierce. His throat felt dry and sore. The pain down below too had been from time to time sharply insistent.

Had he caught something? Was this the first sign? Why did he not know what there was to be known about such things? Should he go round to the club and see if Captain Harnett were there, the authority to consult?

He had shrunk from the idea.

And yet he had felt that he must know. He had resolved to make discreet inquiries for the right sort of medical man. After all, he had said to himself sombrely, it is more than likely that Lisa is diseased, a common whore.

Rancorous thoughts had sculled about in his mind, to cease only when at last Billy came cautiously up the stairs with his first can of hot water. Not that that had been all that hot.

And his lukewarm soap-scummed bath had made him think of Elizabeth again. Of how he had resolved on an occasion very like the present one to further his acquaintance with her with the object of avoiding for ever that dark other world. On that occasion he had scrubbed at himself fiercely in cold water. Now all that he could bear was the big sodden sponge and this tepid heat.

He had managed to sleep a little after that and an afternoon spent sitting by the fire had revived him somewhat, if only to the point of making him nervously determined to do nothing that he could not help. He would not find out whether he was infected. He would not offer anything other than the barest fabricated excuses to Elizabeth and Lady Augusta.

But he had left out of account what those two determined people might have to say. And within a single hour he had received notes from both of them. Lady Augusta's, sent by messenger, said blandly that she trusted he was recovering from his sudden cold and that if she did not hear from him or see him at Brook Street she would call next day. Elizabeth, writing in the morning and putting her letter in the post, said much the same thing but added that all that a cold needed was the vigorous application of mustard-plasters. She too concluded by threatening to call next day.

Threatened? Why had he thought of her call as that, he had asked himself. Elizabeth should not be a threat to him.

Yet she was. He felt at this moment that she was a threat. He had to acknowledge it.

And it was this that had sent him hurrying back to Blue Cross Street to seek refuge in the world of Lisa. He thought of her rooms now as a world, a world apart existing as it were underneath the regular world, unseen by any but those who had the luck mysteriously to drop into it.

He supposed that he could not inhabit it for ever. Quite simply matters of business would sooner or later intrude and have to be dealt with. To do that he would have to step back into the everyday existence where there were bills that were presented and had to be paid.

But for that evening and all the night that followed he was able to thrust aside this thought. He had found Lisa sitting as she had done the previous day in her blue satin dressing-gown with the calf-close boots and the flesh-toned stockings. And she had smiled at him lazily and had said she was glad to see him and would he order champagne.

Then it was as it had been, though at first they were tender with each other and careful, their love-making as it were no more than an aide-mémoire to what had gone before. But, as the night wore on, they began to plunge fully once again into those regions where life was conducted in an altogether different manner from the world above, where conversation was not the medium of exchange but gestures, finger clutchings, mirror pictures made for each other and of each other in the poised cheval-glass, tongue caresses, pressure of limb on limb, slow slidings and sudden frenzied grabbings.

But before dawn the real world slowly thrust itself in on his mind. This was the day, he thought, when both Elizabeth and Lady Augusta would call at Gillingham Place. To those challenges he had to make some answer.

He got off the bed with heavy reluctance. The boards of the floor when he stepped beyond the carpets struck cold at

his bare feet. The fire had died to nothing. He hurried into his clothes which seemed to resist him at every movement, awkward and stale.

Then he woke Lisa.

‘Goodbye, my treasure,’ he said. ‘I must go now. I must get back to my own place.’

‘Will you come again?’ she asked, her voice sleepy and more Irish than it usually was.

‘Yes, I’ll come. No, I don’t know. Oh, yes. Yes. I want to. I must. But I don’t know how soon. Will you be all right?’

And that at last evoked her gurgle of laughter.

‘Wasn’t I right enough for years before I met you?’

‘I know you were. But I want you always to—Oh, I don’t know. Goodbye. I’ve left money.’

He put on his hat and went on tiptoe down the stairs. But Mother Merewether, in her chair as usual, stirred as he unlatched the house door.

‘That’s it, my darlings,’ she muttered. ‘That’s it. Go on. That’s the way.’

It was raining, a steady fall. He hoped to find a night-cab. But there was nothing about. He put his head down, hunched his shoulders and strode bleakly through the pattering drops seeing only the reflections of the last street lamps on the gleaming stones of the pavement.

And it was while trudging along like this that he came upon the coffee-stall.

He had passed the place by, just aware of it as a flimsy cabin of boards and canvas with the small glow of a charcoal fire deep inside. But a few yards further on a chance whiff of coffee made him feel that something hot would banish the chill beginning to invade him from his rain-damped coat and the steady bullying of the wind, all the colder here for coming off the blackly flowing river nearby.

He turned back, entered the wind-strained booth, went up to its short counter and asked for a pennyworth of coffee. Taking the little handleless bowl from the stallkeeper, a red-faced rheumy-eyed individual wrapped—and who should blame him?—in numerous waistcoats and woollen comforters, he took a sip of the weak but at least hot liquid and stood back and looked about him.

On a bench near the end of the counter at which the charcoal fire glowed there were four women sitting close together for warmth and company, their damp clothes steaming a little from such heat as there was within the flimsy open-fronted structure. It was from them, he realised, that there came the dank acidy odour of wetted cotton fustian which fought with the smell of the coffee and sometimes won. And, as clear to recognise as the odour, was the reason the four of them were out so late at night: they were poor whores. One had a long ostrich feather, once dyed red, in her hat. It was broken at the tip but proclaimed its purpose defiantly nonetheless. Another had an old silk shawl, final outcome of heaven knows what a slide down the ranks of the secondhand-clothesmen, but again adding a touch of hard-won gaiety to an appearance otherwise wholly depressing. The third had a battered and sodden artificial flower on her bonnet and the fourth shoes that, though they were cracked and shineless, had a flaunting pair of brass heels.

Whores such as these were no new sight to him. But this was, he thought, the first time he had found himself in close company with creatures quite as wretched as these. On his forays into the East End and others of the poorest quarters he had had them brush hopefully past him but tautened by fear he had always moved hurriedly away. Now, thanks to the lessons he had learnt from Lisa, he was simply at ease with these wretches.

'It's a wet night then, dear,' ventured the one with the brass heels.

'Yes,' he answered, 'a nasty night indeed.'

'You wouldn't,' said the one with the broken red feather, speaking with obvious weariness, 'be feeling good-natured, would you, sir?'

Godfrey shook his head.

'Why, no, to be honest, just now I'm not,' he said 'But I see you have finished your coffee. Would you allow me to buy you all another cup?'

The whores, who plainly had for long been nursing coffee bowls empty of all but a dribble, eagerly accepted the offer. Thin gloveless hands stretched in a moment across the counter. Then from the far edge of the stall, behind his back, a voice spoke. An old, cracked, hoarse, asthmatic, scarcely female voice.

'And aren't a poor old woman to get a cup? Aren't she as good as them?'

He turned.

Seated on the broken remains of an orange-box was a figure that could be dubbed female only because the clothes it wore tended more to skirt than trousers. From under a shapeless hat that few of either sex could have borne to wear, a face peered, hair-sprouting, gummy-eyed, with skin the colour of much-trodden floorboards.

'Give her a cup too, sir,' the first of the whores said. 'She's one of us.'

'Yes, yes,' he said to the stallkeeper a little dazedly. 'Give her a cup as well.'

He looked at the wrecked creature as with hands like the claws of some large unclean bird she hauled herself to her feet. One of them too? Was it really so? Could it be true that this hideous ruin of humanity plied her body for hire?

The whore with the once-bright silk shawl had evidently read his thoughts.

‘You don’t believe what Nelly told you then?’ she said. ‘But it’s true enough. Old Martha’s still on the walk. Ain’t you, Martha?’

The old woman, hearing her name, turned suddenly to Godfrey and wheezed out a high-pitched laugh.

‘Oh, aye,’ she said. ‘I’m good for it still. Good for it still.’

Her breath, mixture of internal foulness and long-pent gin fumes, assailed his nostrils. Her bleary eyes looked up at him with a dreadful dulled sparkle.

‘Oh, there’s chaps as’ll pay old Martha yet,’ she cackled. ‘There’s them as cannot afford more nor to share a crust o’ bread, they wants their rammers housed same as anybody else.’

She laid a claw-hand, creepingly cold to the touch, on Godfrey’s own and leered up at him yet more confidentially.

‘Aye,’ she went on, ‘and there’s fine gentlemen too that have a letch for old Martha. Aye, they do. Don’t they, girls? Don’t they?’

She turned in appeal to the whores on the bench.

The one called Nelly gave a coarse laugh.

‘She’s right though,’ she said. ‘There’s some as likes old Martha better nor us, better nor the fanciest girl in the Hay-market. They likes her dirty old fingers round their pego, that’s what they likes.’

Godfrey’s immediate emotion was sheer disgust. It was not so much succeeded by something else as that simultaneously a quite different feeling also manifested itself. To his astonishment, he found he was feeling for old Martha, and for the other four trollops almost paralleled with her by their ready acceptance of what she had said, a strong current of sympathy.

Abruptly he set down his coffee bowl on the counter while something remained in it still, muttered some form of goodnight and strode out into the steadily falling rain. He

felt that he must at once analyse what was in his mind. And savour it.

The thought of Martha, at her age and with all the physical unpleasantnesses that clung to her, indulging in acts of sexual excitement, though it ought to have revolted him and indeed though it did do so, at the same time filled him with a contentment. He was glad such things were.

But why? Why, he asked himself. And he could find no answer. Plainly, he would not have thought as he had done unless he had been coming straight from Lisa, her influence strong upon him. But Lisa was by no stretch of imagination really like old Martha. She might not be the ideal of beauty, with her somewhat thin frame, her unabundant hair, her crookedy mouth, but she was undoubtedly sexually attractive. And she was clean too, a thing which had reconciled him to the milieu she represented. Still, the clean and attractive Lisa had made him free in a mysterious way of a world of which the disgusting Martha and her four attendant drabs were citizens.

It was a fact. A curious inexplicable fact, but a fact. Then what of Elizabeth and all she stood for? How did that fit into this scheme of things? Elizabeth seemed as remote from it as the moon above, hidden behind the sullen mantle of dark cloud. Would the cloud part for him? Would he get back to her? He felt for the dark world too strongly now. For all its squalor and horrors it too was comforting, every bit as comforting in a strange way as the neat and cosy firelit rooms in Gower Street, and far stronger. It was a stream swirling powerfully as the nearby Thames, black and glossy, full of half-concealed eddies as the tide ran down.

He was skirting the sleeping shapes of the houses of the Temple now, their forms just emerging with the first slow lightening of day, the day in which both Elizabeth and Lady Augusta would pay him visits. And abruptly he found the thought of seeing either of them more than he could

endure. If he saw them, he would have to make elaborate excuses for his absence. To Lady Augusta he would have to invent some reason for his failure to ask Elizabeth to marry him. His tale of a feverish cold was hardly going to be sufficient for that. Whatever he said would have to be something that admitted the possibility of the marriage. It would put him squarely back in the world of marriages and alliances.

And he did not want to go back to that world. He wanted still to stay in Lisa's.

Yet that as any sort of permanence was unthinkable. Men had married women of the streets, and had generally been pushed out of Society for doing so. Well, Society was not something that meant life and death to him. But what did mean life and death was his painting. That had been the be-all and end-all of his existence up to now. And, though there might seem to be nothing to stop him painting with Lisa as his wife, he had no doubt that the two things were incompatible. He did not want Lisa as a wife. He did not want her even as a regular home-keeping mistress. He wanted her in her world. And that world and the world of his art were simply pole-far apart. His art was aspiring while Lisa's world—What was Lisa's world? Was it sinking? Was it grovelling?

If it was he should not want it. But he did. It was strong and he wanted it.

He had come to a halt in the middle of a stretch of deserted pavement, empty as yet of even the earliest movers-about, the lamplighter on his extinguishing round, the postmen, the newsboys, the first scouts of that giant army that was London. Now he swung off into the dawn streets in a sudden burst of fierce walking. Going anywhere, nowhere. But not back home.

Chapter Ten

His feet sent him down to the river and onwards along its course. And bit by bit his eyes began to take in the early morning sights, a baked-potato man out to provide breakfasts for those who had left home before fires were lit, the just open doors of a public house with a barmaid looking at the world with evident sourness, a sweep tramping along with his round-headed brushes over his shoulder.

And there was the river too, slate-grey in the morning light now that the steady patter of the rain had at last come to a stop and a constant flurry of small happenings. A string of barges was already moving slowly up against the seaward-flowing tide. Brown-sailed fishing smacks were putting into the steps at Billingsgate, their decks glinting with their silver catches. A tall-funneled Citizen penny steamer, its paddle-wheels churning, was making her way across from the pier on the far side by London Bridge, a knot of huddled passengers on her deck. He stopped and looked.

But to halt had been fatal. Only brisk walking prevented contradictory thoughts entering his head.

He pressed on down streets where already shopmen were taking down the shutters, ready to catch a little early trade when the huge march of the countless clerks from all the many suburbs of the life-sucking metropolis began. Soon he found himself among the docks, already busy as noonday. There were men at work in hundreds here, dock-labourers, seamen, waterside-labourers, ballast-heavers, lightermen. There were the sailors, English, Chinese, Negroes, Malays, white-turbaned Lascars, red-shirted Americans, big raw-faced fair-haired Swedes. Scraps of talk and snatches of song in every tongue there was floated on the air to be drowned by the squealing roar of cranes rattling chain through pulleys, by the thumping of barrel and bale as they

struck the stones of the quays, by the groaning of carts slowly starting into motion, by the restless clop of waiting drayhorses' heavy hooves, by the crack of carters' whips, by the clatter on the cobbles of wheelbarrows by the score, by shouts and oaths.

To make his way along at all it was necessary to keep a sharp eye out and there was plenty to distract his mind. The hum and roar of mighty business blotted out everything. Even the sight of flaring-clothed women, sleepily emerging to visit the shops, the chandlers, the tally-shops with their garments to be bought by instalments, the slop-shops, the tobacco shops, the coffee-shops and the eating-houses, did not send his thoughts back to Lisa and the bedraggled whores of the night past. There was too much going on. Bustle banged him out of it.

Up on the unloading and loading ships sailors marched round capstans, bent over the spokes, hoarsely singing as they winched the cargoes up, 'Oh, Mexico was covered in snow, the grub was bad and the pay was low'. Others swarmed up and down the intricate rigging of masts, splicing and mending, calling to each other, sending long ropes swittering down to the ground, all like so many jabbering darting monkeys. Yet others stood in boats or swung from cradles over ships' sides, scraping with sharp shrieks of metal on encrusted copper-sheathing or busy with big paintbrushes, making the air reek. Everywhere there was activity, noisy, vigorous, purposeful.

At some point he realised that he was extremely hungry. A whiff of salty oysters from the open door of a shop, the ground in front of it littered with the broken shells, suddenly sent his gastric juices flowing and he hunted quickly round for a public house looking less brutally rough than the generality. He found one before long and ate a plate of cold beef and drank a pint of Barclay Perkins Entire in the

company of men who looked like the mates of unloading ships.

When he came out into the bustle again he knew he had left it too late to go home and be found in bed or sitting wanly in an armchair when Elizabeth or Lady Augusta called. Too late. They would simply have to accept that he had gone off the rails.

The die was cast. Yet it had not fallen for the odd numbers either, for Lisa's world. He found before long that his art was making irresistible demands on him. There were so many sights that he had seen and longed to transfer to paper. He went into a chandler's and bought some rough sheets and a carpenter's pencil.

And for the rest of the afternoon he wandered on, past the provisions warehouses, the hides warehouses, the tea warehouses, the tallow warehouses, the deep-mouthed wine cellars, busying himself in catching in pencil the myriad activities of this great entrance-way to the huge city. There was a vessel new in with silks and condiments from Java, her spicy smell overcoming the prevailing odour of soft rich tar and tangy metallic river-water, her Lascars lithe in the rigging. There was a clipper newly arrived from Australia with gold in her cargo and a platoon of soldiers there to guard it. Their scarlet made a wonderful splash of stiff formality among the loose flowing clothes of the sailors and the labourers. There was a three-master unloading ice from Norway, the great dull crystal blocks swinging down from her derricks into the waiting carts to be taken to the ice-pits to await the summer. The sight reminded him by contrast of seeing an orange-clipper from the Azores lying near the Custom House and unloading her golden sun-fruit into lighters for the stores of Botolph Lane. The two seemed to be the extremes of what the biggest capital of the world demanded in prodigious tribute.

Or there were the side activities of the great port that provided magnetic scenes for his pencil, the barefoot boys in old sailors' jackets playing leap-frog over the bollards, an old woman slipping like a grey shadow with a battered basket on her arm searching for anything dropped or broken off in all the bangings and swingings of the great unloading process. And then there were the parrots. He must have seen more than a score of them in the course of the afternoon, flaming dashes of colour on the shoulders of bare-armed tattooed sailors, squawking harshly amid all the excitement.

But, against these trifling scutters, there was all round him and added to at every minute by almost every event of the day, the huge sense of order. Things were being put in their places, massively. Bales, bundles, crates, boxes, casks, chests, each to its allotted place. He saw great barrels of port once trundled rapidly one after the other from the unloading crane on tiny-wheeled trolleys across to the entrance to a great cavernous cellar, there to roll thundering down wooden chutes each to end in its assigned position.

And he was fined, for smoking. He had settled himself on a comfortable bale and had lit a cigar. A man in a frock-coat wearing a round hat, walking by with a bundle of papers in his hand, turned aside to him.

'Five shilling fine,' he said, jerking the sheaf of papers towards his cigar.

That and no more.

He fished the coins out of his pocket, handed them over and extinguished the cigar under his heel. The man moved on.

When he got nearly as far as Shadwell and the sky, seen through the tracery of masts and cordage, was beginning to lose its light, he found he had become almost dizzy with the sheer overpoweringness of it all. He turned from the movement and the noise, the swinging casks, the jolting

crashes of great bundles of hides and huge baulks of timber, and went into the mean little streets running away from dockland in search of somewhere to take refreshment.

Soon he began to think he had made a mistake. The beerhouses he saw at the street corners were dark and villainous. Among the close-packed houses the light was fading fast and there were few lamps. Suspicious-looking hangdog men and women stood at the open doorways and watched him as he passed. Black pools of water from the rain of the night still stood in the unpaved roadways. Whistles and shouts came from the side turnings, unaccountable and menacing. A raucous burst of noise greeted him from the open flap of a spirit cellar and he caught a glimpse of bearded red-shirted men with little pewter measures in their hands, drunk and quarrelsome.

Ahead of him a mature looking woman, bareheaded and barefoot, came out of one turning and crossed into another. Two or three boys were scampering after her and he heard one of them call out, 'Have you had it tonight, dear?' The woman turned to fling a curse and her hair came tumbling down.

Once he caught a whiff of sickly sweetness and looking in through the unshuttered window of the house that it seemed to be coming from, he saw a Lascar with a long-stemmed pipe which he was heating at a candle-end and guessed that this was opium being smoked. And at the next corner, in the pale light of the sole gas-lamp he had yet seen, he came slap upon a fight between two slatternly drabs. The sight repelled him. One had blood sticking streakily to mouth and chin from where it had poured from her nose and the other had an open cut above one eye. Both had torn clothes and both were yelling drunken abuse.

A small crowd had collected, men, shrill-voiced women and children too, relishing the entertainment, and it was not easy to get past. On the other hand he was no longer sure

that by going back he could find his way to the docks or the river again.

‘Kick ’er, Sadie.’

‘Get yer nails in, Poll.’

Roars of laughter greeted each blow.

He decided to try to slip through. He would have succeeded too, so engrossed were the onlookers. But at the very moment when there was least room between the soot-blackened wall of the corner house and the back of the man nearest him, a great broad-shouldered coalheaver, a particularly vicious move by one of the two fighters sent the whole rough circle of watchers swaying in his direction.

The coalheaver bumped into him, turned his head, and at the sight of his tall hat broke into a wild grin.

“Ere,” he yelled. “Look what we got ’ere. A gent. A real toff gent come to see the fight.”

‘No, no,’ said Godfrey in instant denial, as quickly regretted.

‘No?’ the coalheaver jeered. ‘Don’t like fighting then?’

He turned to the crowd whose attention was wavering between the two women and this new attraction.

‘I tell you wot,’ he shouted. ‘E don’t like to see ladies a-misbehavin’ o’ theirselves.’

‘Please,’ Godfrey said, coldly as he could. ‘Let me pass.’

‘Let me pass,’ came a voice from the crowd, cruelly mocking his accent.

‘You don’t want ter pass,’ said the coalheaver. ‘I tell you wot you want ter do, me fine gentleman. You want ter be judge o’ this ’ere contest.’

The suggestion met a roar of acclamation from the ring of wan excited faces round, and Godfrey found himself almost bodily lifted into the very front of the close circle of torn-shirted, grimy, crop-headed figures that quickly re-formed

round the two blood-marked women. The rolled sheets of his sketches slid from under his arm, to be trampled in the mud.

‘All right, ladies,’ shouted the coalheaver. ‘Go to it now. But no foul fighting, mind, the judge’s ’ere.’

Before he had finished one of the women had lashed out at the other. A jagged wound leapt up on her sallow left cheek. Plainly the attacker had taken advantage of the lull to acquire a weapon.

The wounded woman let out a shriek that rang and echoed in the narrow streets round, and then she hurled herself at her attacker, fingers clawing.

‘Go fer ’er belly,’ shouted someone from the ring of avid watchers.

And the hate-filled virago ducked sharply down, grabbed her opponent’s skirt by its muddy and torn hem and jerked it high. Long, stockingless, dirt-splashed legs were revealed in the faint light of the single streetlamp. And a dark bush of pubic hair.

The surrounding mob yelled its delight. And Godfrey, pinioned by the broad coalheaver so that he could not but look on, felt part sickened by the flap of dangling flesh on the attacker’s face, part disgusted by the sight of such degraded femininity, but part heart-thumpingly willing to be there.

And then came a louder shout from somewhere behind in the darkness. A single yelled word.

‘Peelers.’

The crowd in a moment lost its cohesiveness. The coalheaver let Godfrey’s arms drop. Some of the watchers turned and ran, others slipped silently into the shadows. The two fighters gave each other one last glare of hatred and disappeared one one way, the other another.

Godfrey felt himself banged from behind, jostled forwards in the rush. Without thinking, he too took to his heels, running hard along an alley hardly wide enough for two to

go abreast and black as pitch except for a narrow streak of violet sky above. He stumbled along, fleeing and knowing that he was fleeing, convinced in his turmoil that he had committed some offence that would not stand examination.

Soon he realised that he was alone. His fellow fugitives had slipped into doorways one by one. He came to a halt and leant against a house wall, panting and feeling sick.

He supposed that in this thick darkness he was as safe as anywhere from the swooping policemen.

He smiled with bitter wryness. Godfrey Mann, afraid now of the police like the veriest common criminal.

And then from the head of the narrow alley there came a gruff call and a moment later the light of a bullseye swung down towards him. It fell far short of where he was leaning against the wall but panic thoughts at once invaded his head. Should he crouch down? Lie flat even on the filthy unpaved ground? Should he run?

He stayed where he was, paralysed. The wavering light of the bullseye, not extraordinarily powerful, even mild, advanced along the alley.

And at last it fell on him. It swung slowly upwards from his boots. When it reached his hat a voice spoke from behind it, respectful in tone but noticeably a little curious.

‘Good evening, sir.’

‘Good evening, policeman,’ Godfrey replied, striving to make his voice easy.

‘We’ve been having a bit of trouble,’ the policeman said, still holding the soft bullseye light on him. ‘You didn’t see anything by chance of a fight between a pair of women, sir?’

‘No. No, there was nothing. I did notice a crowd as I came up. But they ran off. I have been walking. Walking round among the docks, and I am afraid I lost my way.’

‘Very easily done, sir,’ said the policeman blandly. ‘These ain’t parts for a gentleman to know his way about in.’

‘No. No, I suppose not.’

‘Now if I was to put you right for Shadwell High Street, you could pick up a cab there, sir.’

‘Yes. That would be excellent. Thank you.’

The policeman preceded him back up the alley, a massive figure in tall crested helmet and heavily falling cape. At the top he gave him some directions.

‘Thank you. Most kind. And can I give you a shilling for a glass when you’re off duty?’

‘Thank you, sir. That’s very good of you.’

When he came at last to Shadwell High Street, Godfrey saw with pleasure the bright globes outside a large public house, somewhere promising better things than dangerously poor food and beer to which heaven knows what had been added. He almost ran to the place, suddenly acutely conscious of the sharp menace and hard bareness of the narrow streets behind him.

Inside, the bars were by contrast all that he wanted. Light from a dozen big gas-pendants reflected in as many ornately-framed mirrors hissed and flared banishing every shadow. Bottles, glasses and pewter pots shone sparkingly. White-aproned pot-boys bustled to and fro. There were good fires and everywhere laughter and busy talk. On the walls rotund casks, interspersed with hanging nets of bright lemons, gleamed and glinted. Tobacco smoke swirled in the air, its cheerful fragrance mingling with the soft peachy smell of beer and the sharper smell of humankind, sweaty and strong, but nonetheless warm and even welcoming. From above, on the first floor, came the sound of a small band tootling and fiddling and the regular thump-thump of dancing.

He ordered himself hot port negus and a dish of steaming sausages with mashed potatoes and sat down gratefully, lending half an ear to the busy talk all round him.

There were plenty of women in the company, every one of them gay, to judge by their flaunting dresses of violet,

scarlet and bright blue, the many pairs of red morocco boots to be seen and the bare heads with shining oiled hair. Some were sitting on the knees of men at the tables and others were walking about here and there, plainly waiting to be picked up. Much of the conversation he heard was thick with open references to the final object of the encounters between man and woman.

Just behind him, standing where he could observe them in one of the big mirrors, there was a solid-looking man of thirty-five or so dressed in a grey frock-coat buttoned to the chin—he unhesitatingly put him down as a professional burglar—and a whore in violet, busy consuming a saucerful of peas with a leaden spoon. The tang of the vinegar they were soaked in came clearly to his nostrils as did the couple's talk to his ears.

'Sophy James,' the burglar exclaimed loudly. 'Know her? Why, I knew her well afore she married that bloke, the gentleman's son.'

'Him as gave 'er the baby?'

The burglar pulled the short clay pipe from his mouth and laughed in genuine pleasure.

'That babe was mine, that was,' he said. 'Sophy was carrying it afore ever she went a-servanting there.'

'And the young son married 'er all the same?'

'He did. Fell in love with 'er soon as ever she stepped inside the door and she had 'im in her bed that very night. So the boy was born in wedlock. And you know where he is now, that young shaver o' mine?'

'No. Go on.'

'I met Sophy in the street not a month past, and she told me. She don't forget an old friend. That boy that's mine, if ever son were father's, is getting hisself this minute the best o' college eddications.'

Godfrey ate, listened, marvelled, felt warmed.

Presently he realised that a girl who had just come in, a pretty young thing in a green dress with a Paisley shawl on her shoulders, was looking at him with particular interest. He wondered suddenly whether he should beckon her over. For less than a guinea in these parts he could have all he wanted from her and she was fresh and healthy-looking as a country-girl. Should he let his eyes meet hers? It would be all that was necessary. Then buy her something to drink and in a little go off with her?

It was placed there in front of him. And he felt that this country-green creature would be perhaps the middle path between the dark world of Lisa and the world of Elizabeth, shining and aspiring. He did not want to choose between them now. Should he take this way out?

Then he saw that in thinking about the girl he had unwittingly been staring at her and she was threading her way through the noisily talking and laughing drinkers towards him.

She arrived and leant forward across the table.

'Are you going to buy me something then?' she asked in an accent that confirmed his guess at her country origins.

'By all means. What would you like?'

'A quartern of Old Tom'd suit very well.'

So, his country lass liked gin. Yet, he admitted as he paid his fivepence and received the order, the drink had clearly not diminished the freshness of the creature's complexion nor the happy brightness of her eyes.

'Well, what's your name, my dear?' he asked.

'It's Betsy,' she replied with the same air of simple candour with which she had asked him for a drink.

Sitting talking to her, all his first impressions were confirmed. Betsy was really unspoilt and transparently straightforward in the half-damaged world all around. He supposed that she was not unique. Certainly in her story, which bit by bit he learnt, she made no pretensions to being

out of the ordinary. She came from Essex, she said, where her father was a farm labourer. One day a young lad not much older than herself had persuaded her to make love for the first time in the corner of a field.

‘I was liking it fine,’ she said, ‘a-lying under him there, till who should come round the corner of the hedge but my Dad, and in his hand his scythe. Afore I knew what was happening he had the blade of it into my Robert’s rump, and he was leaping up and hollering away down the field like the bull was arter him.’

She leant back and laughed aloud at the recollection.

‘But my Dad wouldn’t have me in the house arter,’ she said at last, wiping away the tears of mirth. ‘So up I come to Lunnon.’

‘And you’ve been gay here ever since?’ Godfrey asked.

‘Why, yes. What else is there for me to do?’

‘And how long has this been?’

‘I hardly knows. Three year, may be four. It was haymaking when Robert and I was in that field, I do know that.’

Godfrey talked on. He felt that Betsy brought all the freshness of the hayfields of her early days into the garish busy atmosphere. And, as she chattered back in answer to his questions about her life both in the country and in the magnet-metropolis, he found that the decision which he had been unable to take as dawn had broken had now, in the recesses of his mind, taken itself.

He stood up.

‘Well, my dear,’ he said, ‘I’m, going to leave you now. But please don’t think it’s because I don’t like you. Here, let me give you a sovereign to show I do.’

Betsy took the gold, rang it on the table in front of her with naive shrewdness, pocketed it quickly and looked up at him.

'But why won't you come wi' me, seeing as how you've paid?' she asked.

'I have an appointment. That's all.'

'What 'pointment's that then as you'll give me a shiner to go to?'

'It's with a lady. The lady I hope quite soon to marry.'

Chapter Eleven

Out in Shadwell High Street Godfrey was lucky enough to espy an empty cab trotting quietly westwards. He ran after it shouting and eventually attracted the driver's attention.

'Where to, sir?' the man said when Godfrey came up.

And he found himself momentarily nonplussed. He looked at his watch, thinking himself lucky not to have lost that as well as his sketches in the mean streets.

Only nine o'clock. He had thought it must be much later. There would be time to go to Gower Street. And, yes, he would.

He gave the address and climbed in.

Sitting in the dark interior of the swinging, swaying vehicle, he tried to bring some order into his thoughts. Yes, he was going to Gower Street now, and he was happy to be doing so. His determination to see Elizabeth, to establish himself once more as a dweller in her world, was firm. But just why had he taken it? Or—so mysterious events seemed—had it taken him? It almost appeared so. Listening across that public-house table to pretty Betsy's tale, being warmed by her simple view of the predicaments of her life, he had found that his mind was made up.

He thought now that the process must have, in fact, begun long before he met Betsy or even entered the warm and brilliantly lit atmosphere of the public house. It had become clear to him that, after all, the world of Lisa, that cocoon of time wrapped in the sheets of a bed, was not the only world. The world of Elizabeth, which for two days and more had seemed to be gradually paling away to mere outlines, had, as he had listened to Betsy, swiftly taken on substance again. The colours had been filled in.

He realised suddenly, just as they went out of Cheapside into Holborn, that curiously Betsy for all that she was simply and no more than a street-walker, was in fact of Elizabeth's

party. She lived in the world of payments and receipts, for all that what she trafficked in was her own rosy favours. And Elizabeth, though the notion of prostitution was abominable to her, and though she had an income and did not have to ask herself each day where food and lodging were to come from, applied her income to the necessities of the world, received and paid her bills. How curious it was. Yet the two of them were alike, figures of determination and energy, striving forwards.

Determination and energy. It had been, surely, the extraordinary display of purposefulness that the whole of dockland exhibited that had begun his cure, that massive putting into order of the varied world's commodities. Yet was he cured? Had he been ill? And had the right draught administered at the right time cured him? The world of Lisa, though its colours were now fading fast for him, did not seem all the same a sickness.

A few minutes later he realised that they had turned into Gower Street and then they came to a halt outside Elizabeth's rooms. He got out, paid off the driver and stood for a moment watching the cab clop away past the regularly spaced and orderly lamp posts. Then, without giving himself time for second thoughts, he turned, ascended the steps and rang firmly at the door bell.

The landlady, all starched white apron, stiff and crackling, and starched white cap, opened the door. She recognised him and said that she thought Miss Hills was at home and would go and inquire. And then, after two nights and days in another world, two nights and days that seemed aeons, he was once more in the presence of his Elizabeth.

Absurdly, he had expected her to look different, much older even. And she looked exactly as she always did, wearing indeed the very dress she had had on the last time he had been here when they had decided that they would accept the invitation to the opera, that almost fatal visit. It

was an old dress, but one that he had more than once said greatly suited her, a dark-blue silk trimmed a little with black on the tight-fitting bodice that splendidly showed up her figure. It always seemed to put a new light into her radiantly shining grey eyes, the eyes that he had not expected to change. But, ridiculously too, he had expected her voice to be different, that she would have lost something in the years he had been away of her American intonation. And when she had greeted him, with a 'Good evening, Godfrey' no more, he had been surprised that that warmth was still there.

If it had not been that Miss Watkyn was present, sitting on the other side of the bright fire, nervously adjusting ever and again the little round screen on a stand that protected her face from the fire's glow, clasping a little bottle of attar of roses and at once telling him that there had been a terrible odour from the gas all day, he would have knelt at Elizabeth's feet there and then. He would have knelt and begged her forgiveness and asked her to marry him.

But Miss Watkyn was there, and from her anxieties over the dreadful smell of the gas she moved on all in a rush to her no less terrible anxieties occasioned by his not being at Gillingham Place when Elizabeth had called and her report that his young Billy had hardly seen him since the night of the opera.

'Elizabeth could think of no explanation. The very thought of what might have happened to you made me quite ill. I had to retire to bed. My head ached with an intensity I have never before known. Elizabeth could do nothing for me.'

Godfrey felt a sharp sting of remorse. To have exposed Elizabeth to all this as well as her own proper worries. He wanted passionately to have an explanation to offer her. But what was there?

He could hardly say that he had run away to live with a prostitute in a pair of rooms near Leicester Square. And

even that bald impossible fact was not the whole explanation. Why had he run away? What could he possibly say of that to Miss Watkyn, or even later in private to Elizabeth? He could furnish no explanation even to himself.

‘I am afraid I caused a great deal of trouble,’ he said to Miss Watkyn, with some coldness. ‘A matter of some urgent business.’

It was transparently false. But certainly with Miss Watkyn there he could not offer a syllable more, except that, turning to Elizabeth, he did manage to add that he wished with all his heart that he had not had to leave the opera house so abruptly. And from the look he saw then in Elizabeth’s eyes, fleeting, instantly shaded, he knew she had been well aware what it was he had been going to say to her that evening. And he knew too that she realised that he still intended to say it just as soon as any proper opportunity arose.

And now she said nothing that indicated she wanted him to leave.

But, if she did not want to break off all dealings with him, did this not mean that she was prepared to hear that question of his when he could put it? And if she was prepared to hear it, she was prepared to answer ‘Yes’. She was never a marker-up of conquered hearts.

He felt warmth flooding back into him. All was as it had been. And surely now all would go on being as it had been? Surely he would not slip back now, after this moment, into that other world, lurking, waiting beneath, treacherous and murky and never to be illuminated? Surely he would not. Surely.

So he remained with Elizabeth for more than an hour and the shadow that the gap in their mutual life had created was successfully banished at least for that time. They avoided, each of them equally, the subject of the opera and what they had thought of Signor Verdi’s work. Instead they talked about the picture, which had now passed the period of

drawing on paper the draperies that had been arranged with time-consuming care on the professional model and was now at the stage of transferring these to the canvas in monochrome over the already present form of the muscled body.

But they talked even more of Elizabeth's work. To hear her, those wonderful eyes pouring out their sea-light radiance, expatiate at length on the basic requirements of drainage-systems, or of how by establishing a repair fund with any surplus at the tenants' disposal formerly rag-stuffed windows could be kept re-glazed, was to Godfrey sheer delight. He felt, as she talked of re-plastering and limewashing, of new water-butts and of keeping hens and goats out of homes, the deep-planted idea of his painting positively gaining in nourishment minute by minute.

At last he felt obliged to say that he must not keep either of them any longer. He had been hoping for half an hour or more that Miss Watkyn would withdraw, but Miss Watkyn had sat with her toes on her embroidered footstool toasting at the fire and had laughed and exclaimed in horror and enthused with unabated nervous energy. So eventually he had decided he must leave the field himself.

Yet Elizabeth had a word to say in parting.

'Goodnight, dear friend. And I look forward when we next meet to hearing what you have been doing, to hearing about it all.'

The words gave him plenty to ponder over as his cab took him home. Plainly Elizabeth, although she wanted to see him still, even wanted to hear him ask her to marry him and was surely prepared to answer 'Yes', was not content to accept his almost complete lack of explanation for those two long days in which he had dropped, it must seem to her, out of life altogether. It would not, he thought, be at all in her character to do so.

But he could not tell her the truth. He could not tell her what it was that he had done.

Yes, he thought, it might even be possible to say to her, if not to many other women, that he had gone to a prostitute. She would be disgusted. But she must know, with her directness and willingness to face facts, that men had sexual urges, that they could not live without any sexual experience of any sort till they could afford a proper home for a wife and a carriage to go with it. She must, whether she allowed herself to think of it or not, know this. And so she would accept it.

But that was not the explanation. That was a mere account of the outward events, and even then a somewhat falsified one. To say that he had gone to a prostitute, as if it was an isolated incident releasing a long-held tension, would not be to state what had happened in those days he had spent with Lisa. It would not be to tell Elizabeth of the other world.

He could never tell her of that.

If ever he did, she would ask him why such degradation attracted him. And what could he say? He did not know. Then she would tell him, and rightly—if they ever could have such a discussion—that, if he did not know what drew him there, then surely he was not really drawn. And he ought to agree that this was so. But was it? Although at this moment he wanted once more strongly and truly to live in the world of engagements and aspiring, to ask Elizabeth to marry him, to cleave to her, to have children by her, to take his place in the great scheme of things, would it always be so? At the core of him he suspected that it would not be. He had felt the tug of Lisa's world, and it would tug at him again.

Back at Gillingham Place that night he had flung himself down on his bed and fallen at once asleep, mortally tired

after that day that had begun with his blackly illuminating encounter with the coffee-stall whores and had gone on in a long process of reversal through his dawn-to-dusk wanderings in mighty working dockland and his meeting with the country-fresh Betsy, to end with his confrontation with Elizabeth. But when he at last awoke next morning it was to find himself, miraculously, full of strength and attack. He hardly waited to breakfast but seized his caster-legged heavy easel and dragged it into the best of the light.

For nearly two hours he worked with fierce concentration at the task of underpainting the draperies on his canvas, feeling the flowing monochrome paint, later to bear the colours of the finished work, fall sweepingly down with each fold of the heavy tunic-like garment that he had envisaged for his Venus. But then suddenly, and for him quite uncharacteristically, he broke off.

‘Billy,’ he called down the stairs. ‘Billy.’

‘Yus, Mr Mann, sir,’ Billy said, thrusting his unbrushed mophead in at the door.

‘I want you to take a note to Miss Hills.’

‘Oh, yus, sir. The lady wot always tells me to get somefink cleaned.’

Godfrey grinned at the accuracy of the description.

‘Well, go to this address in Gower Street, and if they tell you she is not there ask where you can find her. But get the note to her.’

‘Right you are, sir, Mr Mann. I’ll find her. Count on me.’

Quickly Godfrey wrote asking Elizabeth to come to the studio as soon as it was convenient. It was time, he said, to put her hands and her face into the waiting picture.

Billy took the letter as soon as it was sealed and could be heard tumbling down the stairs as if he was mounted on some enormous iron-shod post-horse. And Godfrey flung himself back in his chair.

It was not strictly true, he admitted, that the painting was ready for the monochrome work on the proper sitter. There was a good deal to be done on the draperies still. But he had felt suddenly that he must see Elizabeth, that he must bring ideal and reality together.

He ought, he knew, to go back to work. But he felt that would be impossible. The lines of the tunic would lie heavy as lead if he attempted anything on them now. So he sat on and he stood up and paced vaguely about and he went dozens of times to stare out of the big window at the activities on the river beyond the aged wooden balcony just outside. For a little he tried to recall some of the scenes he had sketched among the docks. But that whole day of tumultuous activity had meant so much to him that his pencil lost all its lightness when he tried to recapture its moments and at last he screwed up the sheet and threw it on the fire.

And then, after a wait of two hours and more, there was the cheerful rattle of a hansom on the cobbles of the street below and, craning down to look, he saw Elizabeth with a proud and dazzled Billy beside her.

‘I was supervising a tremendous wash-tub party,’ she said almost the moment she entered the studio. ‘I ought not to have left. But I thought I detected a note of urgency in what you wrote, something more than was in the words.’

Godfrey felt his heart beginning to thump. She knew him so well. So well at one level.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I’m sure that urgent note was there. But, to tell you the truth, though I did feel that I would like to begin putting in your likeness now, there is something that I want to talk to you about before that.’

Had he all along wanted to confront the great obstacle? No doubt he had, though he had expressed not a whit of it in words to himself.

'You want to tell me where you went after the opera,' Elizabeth said steadily. 'But, if you wish to say nothing, I have no right to know.'

'But you have the right. I have led you to expect it.'

'Yes,' Elizabeth admitted. 'Yes, you have done that.'

'You know that I was not taken ill at the opera, that I was not as I told you in my note suffering from a cold, that I was not here when I led you to believe that I would be?'

'Yes. I know all that. So, Godfrey, what was it?'

It was not a demand. It was the deftest of inquiries.

But he could not, now that it had come to the jumping-point, tackle the towering obstacle.

'Elizabeth, I ran away,' he blurted out. 'I was— There was something that I was going to do that night after the opera, a question that I—'

He came to a full stop, as much because he did not want to refer to the proposal of marriage as because what he was saying to Elizabeth was a travesty of the truth. Or, rather, he questioned himself bemusedly and furiously, was it not at least some part of the truth? He had run away, after all. He had even run away from the marriage. It was just that he had also run to something.

'You were going to ask me whether I would marry you,' Elizabeth said, steady now as a grenadier.

'Yes. Oh, yes. And I ran away from that. I cannot think why I should have done, but I could not put that question to you. Oh, Elizabeth, I wanted to. I wanted to ask it and passionately I wanted to hear you answer "Yes". I want it still. But I ran away. Can you forgive me?'

'Godfrey, I must do more than forgive you.'

'More?'

'I must help you to find out why you ran, as you say that you did. There must be some reason, a reason hidden even from you yourself. But we have only to look, to search

diligently. I know that. I believe it. I am certain of it. We have only to bring daylight in and you will see what it was that stopped you. We shall do that, you and I, in the days to come, and then I promise you there will be no difficulties.'

'You are ready to do that for me?'

'Yes. Together we shall do it. Together.'

'Then— Then, you mean that ...?'

'I mean, Godfrey, that you have asked me to marry you and that I will do so, with all the gladness of my heart.'

Chapter Twelve

The days that followed did not, however, bring that shared probing examination that Godfrey feared for all that he knew that he ought to want it. An engagement to marry is a complicated affair. It put Godfrey back into the world of debits and credits with a vengeance. There never seemed to be any time. Gradually it became accepted between Elizabeth and himself that the momentous conversation would take place in all probability after the wedding ceremony. It did not seem to matter that it had been postponed. It was going to happen. They had agreed on that. And it could not alter what there was between them. That too was axiomatic, if unstated.

But in the immediate aftermath of their decision and in the weeks going on from it there was an enormous amount to be done. There was Lady Augusta and Sir Charles to be told of the engagement, with a tactful lack of reference to the short gap that had occurred between his asking Sir Charles and his asking Elizabeth. There were announcements to be made in the newspapers. There were letters by the score to be written, to his trustees, to old family friends. There were congratulations to be accepted, in letters, at chance meetings with acquaintances of all sorts. And the less the acquaintance, it seemed, the more the congratulations had to be prolonged. When he happened to encounter Arthur Balneal in Regent Street, where he had been visiting jewellers about the ring, they had stood together on the bustling pavement for close on half an hour while the Celebrated Investigator, a most fearful time-waster in committee Elizabeth had told him, delivered a whole sermon on the virtues of family life, incidentally disclosing that he was now the proud father of seven.

Elizabeth too had her full share of all this, including a mandatory interview with Miss Watkyn, a task in which she had begged his assistance as being likely to calm the inevitable storm. Miss Watkyn had gone one further than even Elizabeth had expected and had fallen at once into a dead faint.

Even deciding just when the wedding was to take place had proved a matter requiring interminable discussions and adjustments.

‘As soon as it is convenient, since we have agreed to it,’ Elizabeth had said dryly to Lady Augusta when the question had first been broached.

‘I have no doubt that soon would be convenient to you,’ Lady Augusta had retorted. ‘But there are others to take into consideration. Charles has to be down in Wiltshire sometimes and people will not attend an affair not held in the Season.’

An immense amount of juggling with dates had followed. And in the end no exact conclusion had been reached. It was left that if all the preparations Lady Augusta considered necessary could be completed before the end of the Season then the wedding would be in July. If that proved too difficult it would have to be when the Bosworths were back in town in October.

‘We shall be seeing a good deal of you, my dear fellow,’ Sir Charles had said to Godfrey at the end of the last long discussion. ‘We’ll hit on the exact day together.’

‘That would be excellent,’ Godfrey had replied.

And he had meant it then. He was swept away by the happy whirl of all that there was to do. Every daylight hour that was not occupied with arrangements was spent at his easel. The Venus Verticordia in spite of his late start was proceeding well. Elizabeth had made time, despite all that Lady Augusta wanted her to do and of her continuing visits to the dirt-encrusted houses of Perkins Rents, to sit for him

often enough for him to have completed his work on her hands and on her features in the monochrome underpainting. He was busy now with the colour, a rapid enough process. Nevertheless time was getting short before the final day for submission to the Academy. But surely, he thought, with the happiness that seemed to be tingling in every pore of his skin he ought to be able to progress in a blaze of glorious achievement.

And, indeed, the putting on of the colour went with a rapidity and sureness that at moments almost scared him. Only in one small passage, small at first though bulking larger and larger as the inflexible date for sending in the picture drew near, did he experience difficulty. It was in catching exactly the extraordinary quality of Elizabeth's eyes. He tried for them several times, but that generous outpouring of grey sea-light eluded him. Even Elizabeth, when she had asked if she were allowed to see, agreed that he had not succeeded there.

He decided to leave it to the last and worked steadily at the remaining uncompleted passages of the painting. At last only two days remained before he was due to send the picture in.

Elizabeth sent her apologies to an important committee meeting and came to sit for him. Again he transferred the liquid colours from palette to canvas, the carefully mixed greys, the faint blues, the whites and the near-whites. And again, stepping back to view the whole, he knew that he had failed. Now at last the happiness that had bubbled in him like a pot on an inextinguishable fire dwindled to nothing. Despair swept over him.

He stood looking at the picture, with Elizabeth on the far side of the easel gazing tranquilly in his direction waiting to catch a glimpse of him as he looked across at her, and he let the blackness roll on and on in deeper and deeper waves. He would not finish the picture. The day after

tomorrow would come and there would be a canvas with where the eyes, the very centre of the work, should be only criss-crosses and smudges of meaningless paint. He would not exhibit in the Academy in the year after his great success with the Torquato Tasso. His career, that might so easily have gone steadily on and upwards, would plunge into nothingness. He might never even once again pull off the trick that a painting was, never again perform the curious miracle of converting little dabs and strokes of pigment into something that spoke and spoke clearly to the hearts and the heads of other men.

Briefly, and for the first time since Elizabeth had given him her clear and wonderful answer, he thought of Lisa. It was comfort he wanted. That forgetfulness of everything which she had brought him. He hardly thought of those nights they had spent together and what it was he had felt then. He simply sought comfort, like a baby turning to the blotting-out whiteness of a mother's breast.

But the longing lasted only a few seconds.

No, he thought then, I shall not go that way. There are other forms of comfort, more rational, saner, cleaner.

'Elizabeth,' he said, stepping round the intervening easel, 'I am afraid that I have not succeeded once again.'

She broke her pose at once and came round to look.

'No,' she said, with that invincible directness of hers, 'I see that you have not.'

'What shall I do?'

It was a cry of plaintiveness.

'Do? Why, try again later. No doubt you are tired. These last weeks have been altogether too busy. What you need is some good fresh air.'

'Yes. Yes, perhaps it is only that. I shall manage it. I must. And, Elizabeth, believe me, I have done it before.'

'You forget I have seen your Torquato Tasso. The eyes there said so much.'

He laughed a little then.

‘Even that paint-brushes are preferable to scrubbing-brushes?’ he asked.

‘Oh, come, that is past. But the rest you need and the fresh air, could you take me tomorrow to Greenwich on the steamer? Uncle Charles was telling me that that is something else in England that I ought to do.’

‘Yes, you ought. It’s a delightful experience. I went down last year after the Private View. There’s always a party that goes there then. But, I’m sorry, tomorrow’s not possible.’

‘Not possible? But why?’

‘Pohlmann, the art dealer, is coming. He asked to see what I was doing some weeks ago, and I gave him that time.’

He gave a rueful bark of a laugh.

‘I had thought that the picture would be in all its final glory then. Now, I don’t know. Perhaps I ought to put him off.’

‘No,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Let him come. Let him come and he’ll find the work completed. We’ll go to Greenwich now.’

‘Now? You mean at once?’

‘Yes. Why not? It’s not too late, is it?’

‘No, the steamer goes down after dusk. You see the river at night and dine looking out over it.’

‘Well then, why not straight away?’

The sight of her sparkling eyes—those damned unpaintable eyes—was enough to decide him. That Elizabeth, his serious Elizabeth, should propose to go off on such a jaunt at so little notice was such a gift to him that it sent his heart bounding once again.

And then with the suddenness of a revelation he thought he saw, complete and intact, the solution to his problem on the canvas.

Elizabeth had gone across to the chair on which she had put her bonnet when she had stepped up to pose.

‘No, wait,’ he said. ‘Wait. Go and sit back there. Look at me.’

He snatched a brush and dipped it in one of the blobs of still wet pigment on his palette. He took one long look at her. He essayed a stroke. He looked again, painted again, snatched another brush for another colour, looked, painted, looked. The light was still strong, though before long it would darken. He worked in a fireball of concentration. And at the end of some ten minutes he stood back.

‘It’s done,’ he said.

Elizabeth was round on his side of the easel in a moment. She bent towards the canvas, peering at it with an anxiety reflected in every line of her body.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Yes, surely.’

‘I think so, I really do think so,’ Godfrey answered.

The light was in her eyes still. He took a step towards her, grasped her hands in his and, bending his face to hers, kissed her on the lips.

Afterwards, as they walked together down to the pier at London Bridge to catch the steamer, she asked about that one burst of activity that had given him what had so long eluded him. Could it really be that those few minutes’ work had stood between total failure and shining success?

‘If I have achieved success,’ he put in, experiencing a sudden twinge of doubt.

For a moment he longed to turn and run back to Gillingham Place, to race up to the studio, to peer with a candle at those eyes, to make sure he had got them right. Had he? Had he?

‘Oh, come,’ said Elizabeth. ‘You know and I know that there is life there now, where before there was not. But I

find it still a little hard to understand that it should have been arrived at so quickly.'

'No, it isn't that that worries me. Where is the difference between the greatest success in a painting and utter flatness? In a few tiny light touches only. The merest hair marks. But if they are put there with the whole spirit behind them, the true spirit, then they do what they must.'

'Then my last anxieties fly. It's Greenwich Ho!'

And Greenwich was all they had expected of it, and more. Dusk fell while they were waiting in the steamer to depart and a moon, pale and lustrous, appeared from behind piled clouds over the river's southern bank. One by one, too, stars flickered into the sky above them. From the buildings on either shore warm distant squares and rectangles of light appeared. They stood on deck and watched the bustle nearby.

Then, once they had left, despite the steady churning of their paddle-wheels, everything seemed wonderfully quiet. On the north bank the old high walls of the Tower glided by bathed in the pinkish light of the tranquil moon, the narrow window slits made even darker by the soft shadows. Under the Gun Wharf a pair of barges was moored, black looming shapes.

They chuffed their way past the anchored tiers of shipping in the Pool, their high hulls rising out of the placidly flowing river water like so many darkened houses. All along the length of a cluster of blackened colliers, moored stem to stern, a dog raced barking at them as it ran. They passed lighters and tenders, oyster-boats and barges of all sorts, dusty lime-barges up from Northfleet with their piled cargo gleaming whitely, hay-barges with their tousled loads looking soft and springy enough to sleep on for a night lasting till kingdom come.

Now on either side were great black warehouses, the moonlight catching only occasionally the big square white

letters of an owner's name. 'Ysac Whitely Sailmaker', Godfrey read once and raised an arm so that Elizabeth too would see. Only every now and again was the darkness broken by the red glow of a fire of coals in an iron cresset on a hardly visible wharf. A little mysterious wherry, rowed by a single bent oarsman, suddenly shot across their bows, a black silhouette.

Then, as they passed a tall-masted Indiaman at anchor off the southern end of Rotherhithe, its rigging outlined for half a minute against the moon, its hull, solid and rakish emerging from the dark glistening stream, Elizabeth broke a long silence.

'Yes,' she said, 'Uncle Charles was right, this is something not to be missed. It will be long before I forget it.'

At length the brightly lit balconies of the pleasure houses at Greenwich came into view past the ships at anchor there, their lanterns to port and starboard glowing points of heavy colour. Slowly the steamer nosed her way towards the floating quay. Then, just underneath them, Godfrey saw in the chancy moonlight a boy lying asleep on the tarpaulin cover of a barge, calm, quiet and safe, with the lashed rudder of the wide vessel close beside him. It seemed to sum up the set-apart night for him.

He silently pointed out the sight to Elizabeth. She said nothing but took his hand in the darkness beside the rail.

They dined at the Trafalgar in one of the private rooms with tall windows looking out across the river. Godfrey ordered champagne cup, and Elizabeth, who seldom drank anything other than lemonade, needed no persuading that this was an occasion marked out from the ordinary days. And when it came to eating there was on the menu clear or thick turtle soup, both rich with choice morsels of the green fat. There were vol-au-vents, there was cold salmon. There was red mullet or eels or soles piled in artfully arranged pyramids. There was shrimp curry and lobster omelette and

trout. And all that was only a sort of prelude to the whitebait, the speciality of the two big Greenwich houses looking out over the river. Cutlets followed with veal sweetbreads and stewed quail. Then came chicken and duck and saddle of mutton. To follow these there was lobster mayonnaise and artichokes. And then there were the sweets, ices, charlotte of apricots and, crowning glory, something called on the French spattered menu card *Le Pouding à la Vénétienne*.

Afterwards, replete, high-coloured, fed as it were on ambrosia, they went out while they took coffee on to one of the triple narrow balconies that looked down on to the river. Godfrey equipped himself with a huge cigar.

The tide was now well down and directly under them the mud-banks of the river glistened in the moonlight, their even expanse broken here and there by the shapes of old abandoned anchors, broken baskets and the half-rotted hulks of boats, long moon-shadows transforming them into things of curious beauty. Beside, above and below them fellow diners from the public rooms, the men in tall hats, the women in shawls that hinted in the half-darkness at the richness of their true colours, lounged like them and looked on at the wide moonlit panorama.

Suddenly there was a burst of laughter from the far end and, turning to find out what had caused it, they saw that three boys had come skipping out across the mudbank leaving three black trails of pock-marked footsteps in the soft ooze. Someone threw a penny and the urchins, dressed despite the chill of the night in no more than flapping shirts and ragged trousers, scrambled for it energetically. Other coins were tossed out, sometimes glinting in long arcs as the moonlight caught them. More boys joined the original trio and perhaps a girl or two, though it was hard to distinguish one from the other in the tattered garments they wore.

Then, again from the far end of the highest balcony where the diners seemed to be a group of Greenwich habitués, there came shouting more purposeful than the random calls of encouragement that the urchins had hitherto been receiving. There was almost a regular rhythmic chant. And in a minute or two more they were able to make out what the words were.

‘Head, head, head. In with a head.’

Elizabeth turned with a slight frown.

‘What does it mean?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. They seem somewhat in wine.’

And then another voice calling loudly from among the chanters explained it.

‘Come on, you boys. Sixpence for a head in.’

‘Did you hear?’ he asked Elizabeth. ‘They’re offering any of the little brats sixpence to stick his head in the mud.’

‘But surely,’ Elizabeth said, with a quick flicker of concern, ‘no child ... Why, you can smell that mud even from up here.’

It was true that they had all along been conscious of a slight stench, though it was something to be pushed out of the picture. But down at the level of the river the smell could not but be vile.

‘Head, head, head. In with a head.’

Elizabeth made a move of protest, as if she might even be contemplating going along to speak to the roisterers. But just at that moment there was a new cheer and, turning back to the urchins, Godfrey saw that the sixpenny offer was about to be accepted.

One of the tattered band—it should have been a boy but its garment, stiff as a board with hardened mud, was skirt-like and Godfrey had a queasy suspicion that it was a girl—had come to the front and was standing with legs wide apart looking challengingly up at the lighted balconies.

The little performer, with a cocky defiant pride, waited until a degree of quiet had fallen, the proper expectant hush. Then, loud and clear in the moonlit night, its voice sang out.

‘One. Two. Free.’

And down between the outstretched legs went the tousled head. Down and into the thick mud. The silence was now such that Godfrey actually heard the sucking sound as the glutinous vile-smelling stuff parted. In went the head, and down. Down till it was covered to the neck. And then there was a tiny pause.

‘She’ll suffocate,’ Elizabeth said, looking wildly round.

But at once came a renewal of the sucking sound, louder even this time, and slowly, slowly enough to cause a little real anxiety, the head came out of the tenacious oozy clutch.

Through the moonlight a little silver shooting-star curved high from the top balcony and fell within five or six yards of the now totally black-faced urchin. She, or he, went forward, rather slowly, rather exhaustedly, and picked up the miniscule reward. Then, with a spurt of renewed cheeky defiance, the brat looked up at the rows of faces peering down and with pantomime leisureliness cocked a snook at all and sundry.

Godfrey felt himself a sudden prey to mixed emotions. A coarse joke had been played by his fellow diners and he had not liked it. An innocent had been forced into doing something foul for money, and that was surely horrible. And yet ... Yet how innocent was the innocent? There had been a lively willingness to participate, both before and afterwards.

He experienced, across the gap between the lighted balcony and the dark mud below, a dart of sympathy.

But Elizabeth had turned away.

‘Godfrey, it must be getting late,’ she said. ‘Shouldn’t we be going?’

They stepped back into the warm and lighted room behind them, with the remains of the meal not yet cleared away, the wine glasses with their dregs of flat champagne, the broken bread rolls, the crumpled napkins, the stains of sauces on the white cloth. Godfrey rang for the waiter and settled the bill. He took his hat and coat and they went out.

They were both rather silent on the long cab ride home, up the Surrey bank, across London Bridge and on to Gower Street. But, though Godfrey more than once questioned Elizabeth, she each time assured him that there was nothing wrong. Yet, even after he had left her at Gower Street, he had a grain of trouble in convincing himself that the expedition had after all been a total success.

But, he reassured himself almost angrily, it must have been so. It had been a trip through fairyland, a memorable experience, a foreshadowing even of what his life and Elizabeth's would be together. It could not have gone wrong over one ridiculous little incident.

Chapter Thirteen

At home Godfrey deliberately did not take a candle to examine the Venus Verticordia. And next morning he found in himself still an odd but definite reluctance to look at the canvas on its easel. Beyond perhaps a touch or two here and there on one of the Varnishing Days at the Academy it ought to be a finished work now. He would let others judge it, the Hanging Committee at the Academy tomorrow, Herr Pohlmann this afternoon. So he spent the morning on such mundane matters as visiting his bank in Lombard Street, lunched in the City and returned to Gillingham Place only shortly before the German art-dealer was due.

Indeed he left it so late that he had time only to wheel the easel into the best light as he heard the dealer's notoriously splendid carriage draw up in the street outside with an appropriate burst of jubilation from the local street boys.

And then Herr Pohlmann, shiningly dressed from the very crown of his tall hat to the very toes of his double-polished boots, with a diamond pin glinting and glaring in his tie, with his whiskers lustrous with pomade, with his large nose, his strong sensual mouth and his hungrily brilliant eyes, was being ushered in by a young Billy so overwhelmed that he almost bent double in his bow of announcement.

'My dear Mr Mann, this is a moment to which I have long looked forward.'

'You are very good, Herr Pohlmann. I need not say how honoured I am that a dealer of your reputation should seek me out.'

'No, no, my dear sir, the honour will, I am sure, prove in the end to be all mine. In last year's Academy there was nothing to touch your Torquato. If ever there was a picture that I wished to have the handling of, that was it. But you are too slow a worker, my dear sir. Too slow.'

‘Yes,’ Godfrey answered, a little antagonistically. ‘I do find it difficult to bring works forward with any rapidity.’

‘Conquer that, my dear sir. Conquer it. Because it is a failing. I tell you, never till this time has there been such a demand for Art. They are the buyers. Up in the North of your great country. In Birmingham. In Manchester. In Liverpool. The men who have made their success and are asking now, are begging now, to be told what to buy. Let me bring one or two only to see you, and whatever you paint I can sell it to them in an instant. And for more than the six hundred Her Majesty gave for the Torquato.’

Herr Pohlmann laughed with rich pleasure.

‘And now,’ he said, ‘this new picture. I have heard of it, and I cannot wait to set my eyes on it.’

‘You have heard of it?’ Godfrey said, somewhat surprised. ‘I had thought only a handful of acquaintances, of friends, knew what it was I was painting.’

‘Aha, my dear sir, it is my business to know what is about. Just as it is my business—I do not disguise it: I disguise nothing—to persuade you today not to send that picture to the Academy but to let me have it.’

Again Herr Pohlmann laughed.

‘But I know that there I shall fail,’ he said.

‘Perhaps you ought first to see the work,’ Godfrey said.

And he led the shining German over to the easel.

‘Aha, the Venus Verticordia. That lady we have read about in the good Lemprière. Ah. Ah. Ah.’

Godfrey, standing at the dealer’s shoulder, only slowly raised his eyes to look at that vital passage he had completed the day before.

‘Yes,’ proclaimed Herr Pohlmann as he did so.

‘Yes,’ he repeated with a wag of his head decisive as the knock-down of an auctioneer. ‘Yes. Magnificent. Wonderful. Superb. My dear sir, it will sell for more than the Torquato

even if those fools at the Academy sky it as high as the ceiling.'

Godfrey stayed still, looking at those eyes.

'It will not hang in the Academy,' he said after a little.

Herr Pohlmann wheeled round, a tower of shining brass.

'Then I may offer for it? My dear sir, one thousand guineas. Now.'

'No. It is not for sale,' Godfrey said.

The moment that Herr Pohlmann, plainly thinking he had become involved with a madman, had taken his hasty stiff and bewildered leave, he hurried away to Lisa. Hardly had the German's grand carriage rolled away, with a tail of shouting street arabs behind, than he himself was out in the street and hailed a cab that was coming across Blackfriars Bridge.

'Blue Cross Street, and hurry,' he said to the driver, careless of any smirking.

It had been the very success of those two grey eyes looking out on the world that had overturned him. That easy success. There they were, brilliantly painted, shining, yes, and confident, yes. But by no manner of means the eyes of the Venus Verticordia, of the turner of hearts to all that is holy, chaste and pure. Oh yes, his success had deceived Elizabeth. But that had been because she, of all people in the world, was not in a position to know the inner look that poured forth from her when she was most herself. And, of course, he had deceived Herr Pohlmann. He had painted a pair of eyes that would have raised a fine twittering among connoisseurs appraising the newest fashionable portrait. No wonder he had earned Pohlmann's appreciation. But he had missed the Venus Verticordia. He had not been able to live that look.

And that world of Lisa's, which only the evening before he had dismissed as never being able to call to him again, had

in an instant assumed once more a reality, a thickness and a presence.

He could not wait to be with her now, to be enmeshed in her working arms, clasped with force in her twining legs, close as body could be to body with the very pores of her flesh.

The cab drew up at the house in Blue Cross Street. He paid off the driver, ran up, knocked furiously at the door. A little slatternly servant girl opened to him, wiping her hands on a stained apron. He strode in. Mother Merewether was sprawling wheezily as ever in her big low armchair.

‘Lisa?’ he said, barking the request.

‘Lisa,’ Mother Merewether answered comfortably. ‘Oh, you come at the wrong time altogether for her. She’s been gone these two weeks. Gone, and I’ve no notion where.’

She chuckled and wheezed happily, seeming to take as much pleasure from seeing him deprived of delight as she had formerly done when she had seen him about to be rewarded.

He turned and walked out into the street, scarcely seeing where he was going.

But it was not Lisa herself that he truly wanted, he thought, standing there on the narrow pavement. He was not in love with Lisa: he was in love with her world. That was what he wanted. Needed. And there should be no difficulties in the way of slipping into that world through some other snaky path than that of Lisa’s arms. Why, he was at this moment in the very midst of a stalking-ground for strumpets. He had only to look about him.

He went hurriedly up into Leicester Square, glancing to either side for the sight of a woman walking with, as he put it to himself, that unmistakable allure of the Cyprian. But, though he saw one or two likely prospects in the distance and set off after them, it seemed that at this time of the afternoon there were few gay women about. He imagined

that most of them were sitting, as he had seen Lisa sit, at ease on a sofa in front of a fire, three parts undressed, with breasts falling free from a loosened bodice or in a dressing gown for ever slipping from naked thighs, all idleness and luxury, waiting till the onset of evening to get dressed and go about their business.

But there must be some loose girl somewhere about here. He paced sharply round the streets leading off the square, glancing keenly into the narrower lanes, but still without success.

Then at last back in the square he spotted a girl in a red cloak coming towards him some thirty yards off. She was not a woman of the total flaunting carelessness that he had hoped to find, and for a few moments he doubted whether she was in fact gay. But her pork-pie hat with its white feather was by no means a poke-bonnet, though a little out of fashion. Yet what should a woman dressed like that be doing on her own in Leicester Square if she were modest?

She had stopped at the kerb and turned to face the passing noisily clip-clopping traffic, as if she was about to cross or was looking for a cab. His view of her now was almost completely blocked by an old fly-paper seller he had more than once seen at various places in the West End, a curious gaunt figure with an immensely tall hat wound round and round with the broad sheets of his wares thickly dotted with successfully caught victims. He hurried forward, fearing his prey would have stepped from the pavement and be lost to him.

But she had not. Moving round past the tall flapping-coated figure of the fly-paper seller, he went up close beside her.

‘Good afternoon, my dear,’ he said, with a boldness that a year before would have seemed impossible to him. ‘May I go home with you?’

She swung round to face him. He saw at once that her features expressed nothing but shocked outrage.

‘Please,’ she said, her voice already edgy with panic. ‘Please, sir, leave me alone. Leave me alone or I shall call a policeman.’

And she plunged off away from him, walking with long agitated strides and even blundering into a passer-by. He felt sick with shock. Mortification and fear chased each other through his head. What if she did call a policeman? What if her agitation attracted notice? He saw himself seized, hauled away to a police-station, up before a magistrate.

‘One from the country, I dare say,’ an ingratiating voice said in his ear. ‘Dressed like it, she was. That I grant. But yer could tell she weren’t truly.’

It was the fly-paper man.

Godfrey had somehow never till this moment thought of him as being capable of speech other than what was needed to caw his wares. Now, jolted out of his state of appalled numbness by this insidious voice, he turned and looked at the long-bearded tousle-locked man beside him.

‘Hot for a bit of it, were you?’ the fellow said, producing a leer of a smile under his fantastic fly-paper swathed hat.

‘I—I don’t know what you mean,’ Godfrey stammered.

‘‘Cause if you are I can lead you to as nice a little creetur as ever you seen.’

‘I—I’m not sure that I under—No, I will. Yes. Yes, I would like it.’

‘It’ll cost yer, mind. A poor cove the likes o’ me can’t afford to leave his pitch for nothing. I shall want two shilling.’

‘You shall have them, when I see you haven’t tricked me,’ Godfrey answered, with a belated return of savoir-faire.

‘It’s over St Giles way, then. It’s a poor part, as you know, sir, but what you find there’ll be worth the having. Me own

grand-daughter she is, and as willing as may be.'

Godfrey felt a sudden hot flush of abyss-poised joy. There had reared up in front of him in this pander of his own granddaughter a finger-post for the nether world.

'Lead the way then,' he said sharply to the long-bearded pimp. 'I'll follow you.'

The old man deftly rolled up the dangling treacly-sticky papers he had had hanging from his arm and thrust them into one of the pockets of his threadbare long-skirted old coat. Then, with one quick sly look at Godfrey, he set off northwards and east.

Godfrey walked about five paces behind, forcing himself not to think of the unpleasant episode just past nor about the risks that might lie ahead in the thief-inhabited rookery of St Giles. Instead he let vague and tremulous excitement sweep through him. He was stepping onwards into the dark land.

Ten minutes' walk up Monmouth Street and they were there, at the meeting of the seven roads called Seven Dials, the open and noisy centre of the close-packed dark rookery, garish with its seven gin-palaces, its busy cheap provision shops, its big bakers' shops, its old-clothes shops displaying every sort of often-used garment. The pavements and the roadway were lively with the place's sharp-faced inhabitants, drunk and sober, ill-dressed youths with quick suspicious looks under well-pulled-down cap peaks, dark-haired Irish costers with their flat little donkey carts loaded with squashy oranges, smelly vegetables or doubtful herrings, idle-looking men of a vaguely sporting character in short-skirted velveteen coats with stubby empty pipes in their mouths, short-frocked coster-girls with red and yellow kerchiefs across their bosoms, women in shawls that were ragged but bright-coloured—more than one of them bearing a cut lip or a black eye—professional beggars of all sorts departing to prey on the respectable West End or coming

slipping back home with pockets full of concealed booty, song-patterers setting out with their crudely printed sheets on a last round of the less opulent quarters, navvies in huge great ankle-jack boots, cauliflower vendors, umbrella-menders, oystermen.

The fly-paper man slid his way through all the jostle at an unvarying pace and Godfrey followed, keeping a cautious hand on watch-chain and gold-purse pocket. They headed quickly down the narrowest of the seven radiating ways.

They passed rag shops and bottle shops, dingy beer shops, cheap picture-frame and penny looking-glass makers and secondhand-furniture shops. The fly-paper man turned off once, when he saw the way ahead blocked where one of the horses of a mudcart had fallen on the slimy cobbles, and cut briefly through a street devoted to the selling of birds and birdcages, chickweed and dogs and cats. At the corner there a knot of buyers round a pawnbroker's auction blocked their path. The pawnbroker, big and overbearing in a great shaggy pilot coat, was yelling his wares and prices. "Ere's a flannel perri-coat, warm enough, who'll say sixpence?" And back from the crowd came derisive shouts, 'Give you a farden' and "'Tain't worth that.' But at last the pawnbroker seized on some halfhearted bid and triumphantly called out 'Tuppence. Tuppence I take.' The crowd shifted and they got through.

Now the fantastically hatted old man ahead plunged abruptly into a maze of courts, alleys and yards where the people seemed yet more pinch-faced and poverty-marked, wan figures peering from doorways or through the few remaining dirty panes in rag-stuffed windows. But, with every pace they took into the squalid heart of the rookery, the fever in him mounted. The old fly-paper man's granddaughter, she was waiting for him. The old man ahead had promised her to him. He strode onwards.

And then they turned into an alley narrower, it seemed, than any yet, a gloomy cul-de-sac blocked at the far end by a high neglected windowless wall and made almost dark even in the broad afternoon by the clothes hung to dry across it on wooden rods stretching its short width from one upper-storey window to another. Gowns, trousers, drawers, vests and greyish sheets hung limply, ragged and much patched. At the doorways at the nearer end a few women were sitting on the broken steps with their knees up to their chins talking among themselves in almost incomprehensible Irish voices. Was it in such a neighbourhood that Lisa had been a child, he wondered.

The unpaved alley, spattered with ordure, strewn with old cabbage-leaves and turnip-stalks, smelt vile. Twice within its thirty or forty yard length he saw dead cats. He walked close behind the tall fly-paper seller—now no longer a piece of flotsam on the healthy tide of people passing along Coventry Street or Piccadilly, but instead a figure invested with assurance and even a sharp authority—and more than once he slipped on some piece of slimy foulness.

At the alley's end the fly-paper man suddenly turned in at the open doorway of the last house on the left and went down a short flight of dark steps. Godfrey followed, striving to make out where he was being led. At the bottom the light of a fiercely glowing coke fire helped him to see a little. They appeared to be in some sort of kitchen, low-ceilinged but unexpectedly large. Filling all its centre was a big dirty once-white table around which were seated a number of individuals, men and women, hard to make out in the gloom. To one side of the glowing fire a rope stretched with dangling from it a dozen or more pairs of stockings and a few coloured handkerchiefs. At the other side of the fire bacon must have been hanging to cook because its sharp tang was the most evident smell among many less savoury.

Without pause the fly-paper man strode through the room. He seemed from the very way he ignored the shambling figures round the table and from the sudden silence that fell to have added once more to his growing mantle of authority. Godfrey, still keeping as close behind as possible, saw that there was a narrow flight of stairs at the far end of the room. Without a word his guide ascended them.

They went steadily up three floors, Godfrey taking good care to keep to the inside of the narrow banister-stripped stairs. At the top there was a small landing with three blackened doors opening off it. The fly-paper man went to one of them and without ceremony pushed it open.

“Ere,” exclaimed a girl’s voice angrily.

But seeing who was standing there she changed her tone.

‘Oh, it’s you. What you want this time o’ the afternoon?’

‘Brought you a gentleman,’ the fly-paper man said, in much the voice of a master offering a fish to a favourite cat.

Then, without saying more, he moved aside and ushered Godfrey into the room. But at its doorway he laid a narrow horny hand on his arm.

‘There’s half a sov’ you owe,’ he said.

Godfrey, perfectly conscious that two shillings had been the actual extent of their bargain, nevertheless thought it wise to pay up without argument. The old man gave him no thanks but simply turned and went stampingly down the stairs. Godfrey gave his attention to the occupant of the room in front of him.

She was young, not much above twenty he judged. And she was pretty. Or rather—he revised his first easy judgment—she was only slightly pretty but she was decidedly beguiling.

She was smiling. And the smile, making a wide V of her mouth, had a hungry look. But it was not a hunger for food, though from the thinness of her soft flesh it was probable

that she was indeed physically hungry and was used to being so. Yet in the smile, and the poised angle of her head, there was a note of offline confidence, the confidence perhaps of a hungry one who knows there is nothing now that can come between her and her feed. It was a mockingness that simultaneously disturbed and drew him. For the rest, he noted that although she had large brown eyes and softly curling hair she was in no way gently feminine.

The room behind her contained little more than a low bed with a dirty patchwork counterpane covering the bare lean ribbed ticking of a flock mattress, a broken-backed chair and a small deal table on which there was a black gin bottle, a couple of pewter quartern measures, the remains of a loaf and, incongruously, a little earthenware flower-pot in which there straggled a wretched primrose plant with one pale flower on it.

‘Come in then, gentleman,’ the girl said. ‘Come in and close the door behind you. Unless you’re one of the sort that likes it open.’

Godfrey entered, pushing the door with his back until he heard the latch click.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked in a voice that pleased him for its edge of businesslike coldness. ‘Your grandfather failed to tell me.’

‘Grandfather,’ the girl retorted. ‘Father you should say. He’s father and grandfather both.’

She smiled her scornful hungry smile.

A tiny shock did sting him at what she had said. But he succeeded in showing nothing of it. And, indeed, almost as soon as he had felt it, it vanished, swamped by a rich delight.

‘Then your father didn’t tell me your name,’ he said, savouring it.

‘It’s Kitty,’ the girl said. ‘And where’s your purse?’ Without a word he took out his purse and extracted a sovereign from it. He tossed it on to the table.

‘That,’ he said, ‘and no more.’

‘That,’ she answered, still smiling her mocking smile. ‘Until you want more.’

‘We’ll see what you can provide then,’ Godfrey said.

And he advanced on her in a manner very different from the unconfident way he had gone towards Lisa on the very first occasion that he had ever visited a whore, not so many months earlier. Without the least gentleness he pushed her backwards on to the wretched bed and lifted up both her skirt and the chemise that was all she wore under it. Then, unhesitatingly, he plunged his head between her legs. An instant later he felt her hands gripping hard at the hair of his head.

The love-making that began thus was very different from his encounters with Lisa. There was nothing in it of the shared exploration. There was much of the blood-letting cockfight. But it took him to that dark land.

Chapter Fourteen

They had slept afterwards, on the lumpy flock mattress of the dilapidated bed, a sleep of exhaustion not reconciliation. And they did not wake up till it was already dark. A waking caused, Godfrey suspected, as much by the activities of bedbugs as by any readiness to emerge refreshed from slumber. They had woken and they had gone back to the scratching, tearing bruising combat that was love between them.

‘All right,’ Kitty had said at last, as they lay back in the darkness on the smeared and stiff ticking of the mattress, ‘you’ll pay me another shiner now.’

‘Yes,’ Godfrey answered. ‘You sweated for it.’

‘And will you pay me more, for more? Are you man enough?’

‘I’ll stay with you here till you beg me to leave.’

‘You can stay every hour you’ve got the yellow to pay for it. But I’m hungry now. Take me out and give me a fucking good supper.’

They got dressed by the light of a stub of candle that Kitty had reached for from under the bed. Then Godfrey, having handed her the second sovereign that she had demanded and received her taunting V of a smile in return with not a word said, pushed his gold-purse as deep as it would go into its pocket and followed her step by cautious step down the pitch-black banister-less stairs.

But this time he did not pass through the low orange-lit kitchen unaccosted, as he had done when under the protection of the gaunt fly-paper man, wisp-of-straw in the outer world, unquestionable personage in the heart of St Giles.

From one of the slumped half-visible figures round the big table with its clutter of old blackened saucepans, greasy

playing-cards, plates and scraps of food there came a jibing question.

‘What you got there then, Kitty? Where you a-going with the likes o’ that?’

Peering in the dim glow of the coke fire, he saw that the speaker was a strong-featured lank-haired woman of forty or more with a face that in its blunt hardness and time-battered appearance resembled nothing so much as an old bill-hook. Yet she too, he saw, wore the uniform of her profession, the flaunting shawl, the strong-hued dress, the oiled hair.

‘You keep yer mouth shut, Jessie,’ Kitty had flung back. ‘When you can get more for yerself than a quartern o’ gin you’ll ‘ave a right to speak.’

‘Oh yes, you bitch? Many’s the time I’ve seen you flat on yer back for a quartern. Aye, and for a share o’ one.’

Kitty, by way of answer, advanced with claws extended.

But the fight that Godfrey had expected—would the spectacle have driven him away as the fight he had seen in Shadwell had done, he wondered—did not materialise. A girl a good deal more presentable than any of the others round intervened, a pretty buxom creature of thirty or so with a totally surprising air of invincible respectability about her.

‘Now, come on, girls. We can all be friends. Times is hard on all of us alike.’

There was a moment of strain. Then the billhook-faced woman sat back on the crude bench at the table with a muttered ‘It’s well enough for you, Rosy’ and Kitty lowered her claws and turned away with a flounce.

‘Come on then, me fine gentleman,’ she said to Godfrey, with another of her mocking cat-smiles. ‘Show us you can spend yer money, if you can spend nothing else.’

For an instant he was ready to counter the jibe, which was certainly grossly untrue. But commonsense prevailed and he followed her out of the house.

He took her to eat at a slap-bang in the Tottenham Court Road, hardly a respectable establishment. But with every minute that the meal lasted she gave him more cause to regret having chosen even such a place as this. She spoke so loudly, even shouted more than once, that he several times thought that they would both be asked to leave.

He sank to using the grossest flattery to keep her somewhat quiet.

‘You certainly put down that girl back at the house when she made that remark to you.’

‘Jessie? You know what she is? Scum. Bloody scum.’

Her voice rang out.

‘Yes,’ he said quickly. ‘She looks as though she lives a hard life.’

‘Hard life?’ the scornful voice shouted out. ‘She’ll tell you that quick enough. Daughter of a farmer, she’ll tell you. Came to visit London, she’ll say. See her aunt. Lured away by a gentleman passing the window, that’s her tale. Drugged, she says. Woke up in a bleeding dress house.’

‘A dress house? What’s that?’ Godfrey asked loudly.

‘You fucking milksop. You wouldn’t know that, would yer? Wouldn’t know nothing about a house where the girls is kept half-naked and only given a dress to go out in—and that with a shadow to follow them every step.’

He lapsed into silence and let her rant out more insults for Jessie and the credibility of her story and demand gin and yet more gin. He would not have believed any woman could drink so much and stay upright, had it not been for the telltale black bottle he had seen in her room beside the one-flowered primrose in its little pot.

Once he remonstrated with her.

‘Better?’ she screamed. ‘Better without it?’

She hauled herself to her feet and stood with her hands supporting her on the table, leaning over it, her pale face flushed scarlet now, her mocking smile far away.

‘I’m not better without it, d’you hear?’ she shouted, sweat suddenly damping the dark curls at her forehead. ‘I’m not. I’m not. I can’t do without it, see. I must have it. And neither you nor anyone on God’s earth can’t do nothing to make it different.’

Godfrey had no answer.

He sat still and looked down at his plate. At last Kitty slumped back in her chair. And she demanded more gin after this, and he gave it to her.

She was singing when at last he managed to get her out of the place. And she sang and shouted all the way back to St Giles. Fuzzy from all the drink she had abused him into taking, he asked himself dazedly why he was staying with her. Why endure it all? He could walk away, knock the drab down if need be and escape. Whores were treated as badly every day of the week.

But he knew he would do nothing but go back with her to that bare little room with the disgusting bed in the corner and, while there was so much as a scrape of willingness left in either of them, he would make love with her. If making love it could be called. Was it not rather making hate? No, though fierce enough and black-willed enough, it was not that.

It was engaging with her to plunge and writhe and plunge deeper and deeper. And he was going to do it.

He pushed and jerked her past the busy shops and stalls of the night-living rookery, crudely and harshly lit under the glare of the naphtha flares. The naphtha man’s cart went by, evil-smelling above all the stink of rotting vegetables, horse dung and sour secondhand clothes, its owner, a battered half-idiot, leading his old white horse while the measures round the big reeking can clinked against it. And all the while Kitty’s raucous singing screeched out above the shouts of the fruit and vegetable mongers and the roaring of the butchers and the shrill whistling of the burners of the

gas-lights in their shops, unscrewed to make high wavering come-and-see jets of light. But no matter how loudly the butchers clashed their knives and shouted 'Hi, hi, weigh away, the rosy meat at threepence ha'penny' still Kitty's voice out-topped them all.

Even here she was attracting attention. Godfrey seized her by the elbow, dug his fingers in and drove her by main force through the crowds of bargainners.

'You wait till I get you there, you bitch,' he snarled in her ear.

'Me wait? You wait, you bugger. I'll show you. Oh, won't I just show yer.'

Godfrey drove her on. A beggar, brother to some of the shambling figures round the lodging-house table, crossed their path as they passed the rich frying odours of a fish stall. Kitty kicked out and swore at him. Godfrey, all gentlemanliness abandoned, shouldered the half-dressed wreck aside with total lack of compunction.

At last he propelled her beyond the greasy smell of hot penny puddings and the pigs' trotters laid out in shiny pink rows and into the close-packed courts and alleys. And then they reached the unlit unpaved blind alley of the lodging-house. He strengthened his savage grip on her elbow and plunged down it.

But about halfway along some piece of rotten debris caught his foot and sent him, in his far from sober state, sprawling. Kitty he took with him, spitting curses.

And then in the darkness and amid the slime and mess of the stony unpaved ground it came into his head to take her.

No sooner had the thought presented itself than he was ready, welcoming it with coursing joy. So, struggling and kicking in the dark, with strong in his nostrils the smell of the ordure all around, he heaved up her skirt, tugged gropingly at his own trousers and mounted her.

It was a wretchedly botched business but it satisfied him quite as much as any of their love-making before, or even more. Afterwards, lying half on top of her still, with one knee wet in a puddle reeking of urine, he actually slept.

It was not a long sleep, but when he staggered to his feet he found that Kitty was still totally unconscious, snoring heavily, lost in gin-fumes and satiated lust. He tried shaking her but she hardly stirred and at last he had to heave her up across his shoulder and stagger with her down the remainder of the alley. He found with difficulty in the dark the now shut door of the house, kicked it open and stumbled down the steps to the kitchen.

The slumped figures round the table were still there, with perhaps a few new ones, a few gone. He let Kitty's slack body slide to the floor as he stood at the foot of the steps. Then he leant back on the greasy blackened wall behind him, feeling more than half inclined to let himself drop like Kitty into a sleep of insensibility.

He might have done so except that his entrance caused some stir.

The billhook-faced Jessie stood up and looked down at Kitty.

'Drunk, is she?' she said. 'You ought to 'ave left her lie. She ain't long fer this world anyhow.'

'Not long? No, I suppose the gin will be the finish of her sooner or later.'

'That or the river,' Jessie answered unconcernedly. 'She's for one or the other, that's certain.'

Godfrey stood in silence looking down without much pity at the sprawled doomed form at his feet.

'She ain't got a bit o' white on 'er, 'as she?' asked a pale-faced squint-eyed man, thin as a lath, rising up and moving round the table towards the unconscious Kitty.

'Don't be a fool, Barney,' Jessie said. 'You can't mouch what she got with the gentleman standing there. You get out

wi' your bit o' stinking offal. There's still folks about up the West what'll pay yer when they sees yer chewing on that.'

And the beggar did as she had told him, taking from the table an indescribable piece of lights and slinking past Godfrey holding it.

'Rosy'd put 'er to bed,' Jessie said, looking mournfully at Kitty's heavily breathing form. 'She'd do it, only she's on the walk. Never misses that one, saving up she is. Saving up to buy 'erself a coffee-house.'

She looked down at the dark surface of the once-white table in front of her as if it was a book she could read from.

'Will no one give me a hand?' Godfrey asked, only half caring whether he got an answer or not.

But a figure rose up from the darkest corner of the firelit kitchen at his request. It was a figure that sent at once through his whole frame a curious tingle of uneasy cold apprehension mixed with the tiniest stirrings of what he hardly dared acknowledge was desire. In the dim orangey light he had seen first a glimpse only of big eyes rolling whitely in their sockets, then the just-caught highlights of a face, a large round face with thick lips and shining grinning teeth, and at last a body, big and wide-bosomed, straining a tattered dress of gaudy crimson, that told him he was looking again at the mulatto whore who had chased him that night in Coventry Street when he had first met Lisa and had been rescued by her from the mud of the lane where he had fallen.

It might have been some other woman of her colouring. But he knew that it was not. It was the very same creature who had chased him, as it were, into this underworld.

'She want a-carryin' upstairs?' the big whore said in a thick lilting voice, coming round the big table and looking down at Kitty.

'Yes,' Godfrey answered, feeling his mouth go dry. 'Yes. I couldn't do it on my own. Not tonight.'

'You 'most as bad as she, dearie,' the mulatto said, giving him a brief glance.

'Yes.'

She does not recognise me, he thought. Well, why should she? A man she had chased, out of some impulse of wild devilment one night getting on for a year ago?

But I know her. Beyond doubt she is the same.

The big whore stooped and hauled Kitty up by her armpits, easily as if she were an empty sack.

'You gonna take her legs?' she asked.

'Yes. Yes, of course.'

Together they lugged their slack burden up the narrow darkened stairs, feeling their way by the walls and falling each of them more than once. At last they reached the room at the top and lowered the still-grunting-in-sleep Kitty on to the floor, half propped against Godfrey's legs.

'You got a lucifer, gennelman?' the mulatto asked. 'There ought to be a mite o' candle, if you got a lucifer.'

With difficulty Godfrey found in his pockets a bunch of matches and struck one, stooping to the rough surface of the floor. As the brief light flared he saw the mulatto looking round the bare little room for the candle, her figure momentarily outlined, heavy in breast and hip yet even in this glimpse plainly sinuous and life-full. He felt abruptly how ridiculous he had been that night in Coventry Street to have run from her.

The lucifer began to scorch his finger tips. He flicked it out.

'What fo' you wanna do that?'

'I could hold it no longer.'

'Why, hell, what we wanna candle fo' anyway? You wanna leave that bitch on the floor and come on the bed?'

Godfrey stood in silence, thankful for the darkness that hid his face and his thoughts. Did he want to go on the bed

with her? Yes, he did. Yet he felt possessed equally by a strong hesitation, a throbbing reluctance. It was not that he feared the big whore still, though he did so a little. It was that he seemed to feel that by holding back he was all the more adding to his desire to give himself entirely to this creature of the dark here in the dark.

Then from further into the little blackness-swathed room the mulatto spoke again.

‘I can’t see nothin’. You going to go on the bed, or not?’

It was the last two little words that decided Godfrey. Or not.’ They admitted the possibility of retreat from the experience that awaited him and he seized on them.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Not tonight. Not after all I’ve had to drink. And her.’

‘Maybe tomorrow then,’ said the lilting voice from the darkness. ‘Maybe tomorrow. And you pay Mary good, huh?’

‘Yes, Mary, when the time comes I’ll pay.’

‘Then you want I help you put her on the bed now?’

‘Yes. Yes, if you will.’

She came forward and he felt her picking up Kitty by her heels. He put his hands under the girl’s arms and heaved. Together they swung the sack-like body on to the bed.

‘Goodni’, gennelman.’

‘Goodnight. Goodnight.’

Godfrey listened to her going down. Freed of a burden, she seemed able to see extraordinarily well in the darkness.

He wondered what he should do. Leave in his turn? Creep back to Gillingham Place? He was too tired.

He flopped down on the ruckled bed beside Kitty and let sleep overcome him. His last thought, as slumber invaded his whirling brain, was that he must have left his hat outside there in the alley where it had rolled away when he had fallen. How would he manage next day without it?

He had gone home next morning, the hat problem proving easily solved by sending a boy stockbuzzer, or handkerchief pickpocket, round to the nearest Jew's shop for a secondhand one. The purchase had been rather thin as to the nap but presentable enough. He had needed to re-visit the ordinary world for the simple enough reason that he had hardly any money left. His appearance in clothes still smelling of the urine that had soaked them when he had lain with Kitty in the alley had plainly astonished Billy.

He had spent only an hour at the studio, however, just long enough to get himself fresh things to wear, to tell Billy vaguely that he would be away for some time and to have some breakfast. Then he had set out again, first to Lombard Street to his bank, and then back to St Giles. Yet his brief stay in the studio had not been easy. He had been unable to keep at bay any longer the thought of Elizabeth. The Venus Verticordia had greeted him the moment he had entered the room, the easel placed just where it had been put some eighteen or twenty hours earlier when he had wheeled it forward for Herr Pohlmann to see. Elizabeth's eyes seemed to be shining on him, excited and brilliant as they had been at the moment he had agreed to that jaunt to Greenwich. Had that happened to him? The same him that had wrestled with Kitty on the stale-smelling ticking of that heap of a bed, had lain on her in the filth of the alley?

Yet all he did was to let the thought that he could not prevent himself thinking exist. Yes, he was treating Elizabeth appallingly. But he refused to bend his mind to any consequences. He would not consider whether he should write to her breaking off the engagement. He would not consider whether he ought at least to say something to Billy to indicate that he was mysteriously ill, so that Elizabeth might have some reason to give herself to account for his betrayal of her. Excuses and engagements were for the world that stood above. And he was of the underside.

Chapter Fifteen

And now the underside held him. Back in the house at St Giles he plunged again with Kitty, breathed from her gin-fumed mouth, caught those softly feminine curls of hers in tight-clutched fists, hit her, was torn and scratched by her, loved her and raged at her. But he did not spend all of the weeks that followed with her, or in St Giles. Other whores lured him as he passed from hand to hand in the formless world he had dropped into so completely. In Spitalfields, round Leather Lane, in Whitechapel, his days went by in one long, almost uninterrupted dream. Or nightmare, desired nightmare.

Seldom shaving, dressing for days in the same shirt and the same clothes, drinking more than he had ever done in his life before, and far worse, he hardly recognised day from night. Certainly he could never tell one day of the week from the next, except that sometimes as he made his way from one territory to another he noted the unusual quiet of the streets and guessed that it must be Sunday. He ate astonishingly little, buying a saveloy or a pie from the meat-pie man or a halfpenny baked potato from the vendor with the can on his arm. Or he would share with some drab he had fancied her supper of cabbage boiled with a pig's head or a pennyworth of whelks. Neither the nauseous smell of the cheapest tea nor the rancid taste of poor butter upset him, as once they would have left him retching. He swallowed the latter spread on a slice from a quartern loaf, rough and gritty, with an ounce of dark ham or a piece of cheap Dutch cheese and felt satisfied as when he had dined on six courses at his club.

He took every sort of risk and could scarcely believe it when he continued to escape unharmed. Yet he never counted on going scot-free and observed his scatheless state with mild surprise. Only once or twice did a sudden

fear of disease overtake him and cause him to hide away in whatever private corner he could find where there was light enough and examine himself tremblingly for telltale bleb or soreness. But he never found anything. He seemed to share in this, by extraordinary chance, all the famous luck that Captain Harnett had so often boasted of.

So he went crazily leaching from one secret experience to another. He slept with an opium whore once, a vision-sodden wretch with grey lips and languid eyes, amid the vapid bitterish odour of the smoke from her pipe and those of the two Lascar sailors lying moonily in the same tiny room. He tried a pipe himself too, but it gave him nothing of what he sought. He slept with the billhook-faced Jessie in St Giles, and not simply because drifting back there one day he found that Kitty was no longer at the house. But it was at the St Giles house that he refused the only two harlots he rejected in the whole of the time. Once he pretended not to hear a brisk overture from the dumpily respectable Rosy—a week or so later he heard that she had finally opened her coffee-house and abandoned the profession she had worked at so coolly—and more than once he made excuses not to accept easy invitations from Mulatto Mary.

He could never be clear why exactly he continued to postpone—he was certain that his excuses were no more than postponements—adding this one particular motte to his hardly to be numbered tally. It was not fear: he feared nothing now. It was not disgust: that only sharpened his appetite. But it was something, something definite enough for him to be in no doubt about refusing whenever she would casually propose ‘going on the bed’ with him.

But everything else that came his way, everything that he heard talk of, in these weeks he accepted with eagerness. One night in a den near Bluegate Fields he took a young girl who had been offered as a stake at cards in a game between a circle of thieves. He led her outside to the back,

bent her over a pile of old upended baskets and took her dog fashion. More than once he slept with two whores together, egging them on to every trick that his imagination could invent.

Yet he was not absolutely wholly committed. At times he saw this, and flung himself with even hotter fury into the mire because of it. But he did not quite sever every connection with the world of order and regularity. He never attempted to realise all his monetary assets and visited his stockbroker on several occasions. He went too to his bank.

He returned to Gillingham Place only once more however. It was some nine or ten days after his first visit and again he had needed money and clothes. But something alerted him, perhaps only poor young Billy's evident unease in his presence. And when on leaving he noticed leaning against the nearest end pillar of Blackfriars Bridge, a spot that commanded a good view of his door, a big smooth-faced fat man dressed in fear-somely respectable black whom he had already observed lounging there as he went in, he guessed at once that someone was spying on him. It was plain what must have happened, he thought. Elizabeth after a day or two without hearing from him would have sent round. She would have heard young Billy's story of his first mysterious return. She would have consulted Sir Charles sooner or later. And Sir Charles would have called in an inspector from Scotland Yard. There would have been little such an individual could do but to set a watch.

Luckily for him—something to be said for the observing eye of the artist—the watcher had been somewhat conspicuous. He let him follow for a quarter of a mile or so, a prominent drifting big black balloon, as he walked in the direction of the City and his bank. And then he used the towering fane of St Paul's as a convenient many-exited place in which to throw him off.

Yet at the bank he made no arrangements to take as much gold with him as he had to his account. He simply withdrew a sum that he calculated would last him for a fortnight or so and went. Afterwards, on the way across to St Giles again, he told himself that it was a sensible precaution to venture into such dangerous parts with no more than the minimum convenient sum on him. But he knew that this was an excuse he was making to himself only. He wanted, though he would not acknowledge it, a lifeline still. He ought to be beyond taking sensible precautions.

Yet he was utterly surprised, felt himself indeed almost faint with shock, when in Lombard Street one day, towards the middle of May, as he stood watching the banker's clerk pouring the gold he had asked for from his copper shovel on to the scales, and looked at the heavy ledgers all round the massively decorated walls, the thick bundles of notes in the drawers below the broad polished counter, ten pound, fifty pound and hundred pound, suddenly a familiar voice broke in on him.

'Godfrey. So I've found you.'

It was Sir Charles.

Idiot, he cursed himself when his first paling shock of dismay had passed. Idiot. I ought to have recalled that he banks here. It's why I do so myself. Fool. Fool. Fool.

'Good morning, sir,' he managed to say at length, in a terrible parody of the easy man-about-town. 'How pleasant to meet you.'

'No, Godfrey, it won't do,' Sir Charles said gravely.

His generally smiling face, under the scanty brushed-across hair, was sadly serious. But there could be no doubt about the resolution in it.

'No, my boy, now that I've found you, you owe us an explanation. Or if it would be impertinent of me to ask one for myself and Augusta I must certainly ask one for Elizabeth.'

Godfrey bit his lip.

‘I know, sir. And— And there’s nothing really I can say.’

Sir Charles looked at him with a shrewd light in his pale tired eyes.

‘I take it that it’s a woman?’

‘Well, yes, sir.’

It was hardly the truth. But the truth could not be told. Not because the facts were not recountable. But because he himself could not fathom out any reason behind them.

‘I hinted as much to Elizabeth,’ Sir Charles said. ‘I felt that a girl like her might understand, though she could not condone, behaviour of that sort.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘My boy, she was distressed. Bitterly distressed.’

‘I know that she would have been, sir.’

‘And could you tell her nothing? Not send a letter, any sort of letter? Give her something to let her persuade herself into believing that it was not something in her? Eh? Eh?’

Godfrey hung his head.

‘I know that I ought to have done.’

‘My boy, she has been ill.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And you still will not provide me with an explanation?’

‘Sir, if there was one that I could give, I would. Believe me, sir.’

‘And are you going to walk out of this place and disappear again? Is that it?’

There was an ice-edge of anger in Sir Charles’s voice that Godfrey had never, no matter under what trying circumstances, heard in him before.

He had nothing to say.

Sir Charles drew himself up to his full modest height.

‘Tomorrow is Derby Day, my boy,’ he said.

‘Derby Day, sir?’

A look of blank astonishment appeared on Sir Charles’s face.

‘You mean to tell me that you did not even know that? You’ve not been abroad, have you? In Africa? Somewhere like that?’

‘No, sir, no. It was just that I have not been thinking of the days or the time.’

Sir Charles looked at him without speaking for a moment. Then he gave a quick sigh.

‘Very well, then, listen to me. Tomorrow is Derby Day. I had persuaded Elizabeth to make the trip with us. We thought perhaps the air, the bustle ... Well now, you are to come too. D’you understand? I require it of you. You are to come, and during the course of the day we fix on a date for the wedding. We fix on it, or we hear no more about it. And, damn it, no more about you.’

He stood there, a good three inches below Godfrey’s height, back straight as a ramrod, eyes levelled, and he delivered his challenge.

For one short second Godfrey stood mute. Then he grabbed at the heaven-sent lifeline.

‘Yes, sir. Very well then, you may expect me.’

‘Good. We leave from Brook Street at ten. Good day to you.’

‘Good day, sir.’

He spent the rest of that day in his studio, sitting for almost all of the time in his tall armchair, his hands gripping its sides as if he was clamped into it like some prisoner secured there while his captors made up their minds whether to shoot him or not. And he was a prisoner, though he was his own captor.

He had taken a hansom back to Gillingham Place and he had cursed at the driver for not getting through the tangled

City streets fast enough. They had arrived at last in a fine rattle of speed and he had taken the stairs at a run and had flung himself then into the chair and had held fast to the arms.

He was convinced that if he once loosed his grip he would go back to St Giles, find ample eager Mulatto Mary and with her spiral ever downwards for what was left of his life. So he forced his fingers to dig into the horsehair of the chair arms and keep him there. He sat and, rather than let himself think, clung instead for hours to one repeated thought. 'I have said I will go to the Derby tomorrow.'

Why had he said it? If the choice had been put disinterestedly before him, he had no doubt which way it would have gone. To continue that downward-plunging blackness-seeking life he had led since the day Herr Pohlmann had unwittingly shown him that he had failed hopelessly in the Venus Verticordia to live the life that Elizabeth was? Or, to take up again that life, to strive upwards towards the light? There would have been no hivering. He would have plumped in an instant for downwards.

But he had been tricked, tricked by Fate. To have Sir Charles suddenly appear at his side, someone he had held in front of himself since boyhood as a model of all that was simply admirable and true. To have Sir Charles come from nowhere and tackle him in the straightforward way that was his own. That was altogether too much.

Yet had he not all along wanted really to be tricked in some such manner? Had he not, plotting against himself, arranged more than one possible ambush to be sprung by the forces from the world above? The bank? Walking through the West End streets on occasion? Going to his stockbroker? And once when he had seen his hair needed cutting—concern over the length of his hair and living in St Giles—had he not gone all the way to March's? He had. He

had. And did this not mean that he did not truly want to pursue that mire-seeking course he had seemed so set on?

He shook his head in bafflement.

A moment later Billy, with plain wariness, peered round the edge of the door.

‘Was there anything you was a-wanting, Mr Mann, sir?’

‘No. No, Billy. Yes. Wait. The easel. Push it against the wall, boy.’

‘Yus, sir. Right you are, sir.’

The casters, left for so long in the same position, squeaked abominably as Billy leant his weight to the heavy easel.

‘No, you little fool. Not that way. With the picture to the wall, you idiot. And hurry.’

‘Yus, sir. Yus, Mr Mann. Yus, guv’nor.’

Billy left the room at a scuttle.

Godfrey sat on, the lamp unlit, as the darkness of early summer slowly invaded the room.

Was he really going to go to Brook Street next day? To be there by ten, all ready to accompany the Bosworths down to Epsom? Dressed in his grey frock-coat with his grey silk hat jauntily on his head? And a flower in his buttonhole too? Even that? He would get it from the flower-girl at the corner, the one with the soft Irish accent that reminded him of Lisa. Lisa.

But no. No, he must not let his thoughts stray in that direction.

His thoughts must never stray down that path again. Yet how could they not? They had done so even when he had been in the highest flush of his love for Elizabeth. He had deserted her then. On the very night that he was to have asked her to marry him. And again he had deserted her when, in spite of everything, she had led him to the point where he had asked her that question at last. He had

deserted her twice. What was there to make him think that he would not do so again? That he could at all prevent himself doing so again?

And if he was to do it, what fairness or justice was there in allowing Elizabeth to think that he was once more hers? If, indeed, she would do that. Was Sir Charles not being somewhat high-handed in summoning him to the Derby with her? Would she not have something to say about it?

A sudden sweaty flush spread over him as he conceived the notion that Sir Charles might confront Elizabeth with him next day without notice. But no, he could not do that. He would warn Elizabeth, and she would make up her mind whether she wanted to see him or not. And if she did not? Surely then he would not have to go through the mockery of going down to see the race and pretending to be delighted with the outing and the sport?

No, Sir Charles would send a message.

He sat expecting a messenger, or a footman in a cab with a note, for two solid hours. No one came. The latest time he had fixed on, in a series of frenzied hypothetical calculations, ran out. And he had to admit that Sir Charles had had ample time to tell Elizabeth that he would be of the Epsom party next day, and that she had accepted his presence.

Could she really do that? Well, Sir Charles had said that she had been greatly distressed. And that must mean, in plain terms, that she loved him. And that she had continued to love him. So she would welcome him at ten next morning. She might feel that he had a heavy weight of explanation to give. But fundamentally she would be delighted to see him.

And therefore he ought to be delighted at the prospect of seeing her, to long to go back with her to that sunny world he had left.

He leapt up then and strode across to the window to peer up at the nearly dark sky and try to determine what the

weather would be next day. If it was going to rain, or even snow as it had done on some Derby Day if he remembered aright, then it would be a sign that the sunny world had gone for ever.

But the sky was clear. A faint star pricked into light, the Evening Star, the planet Venus, and turning as much as he could he saw the last of a long red glow fading in the west. Red sky at night, the shepherds' delight.

He sent Billy out to get him something to eat then, and as soon as he had had it undressed and went to bed. He told himself that he would not sleep, that he had too much in his mind. But within minutes he fell into a profound unconsciousness.

Chapter Sixteen

At ten minutes to ten next morning he was in Brook Street. Outside the Bosworth house their barouche stood, gleaming splendidly in the hazy sunshine, open to the air, ready for the journey. The four matched horses were stamping nervously from time to time with sudden shivers passing over their magnificent limbs, almost as if they knew not simply that an outing was in prospect but that this was a day of days.

Then, just as he reached the steps of the house, two footmen, calves gleaming in their yellow silk stockings, came up the area steps manoeuvring between them an immense picnic hamper. He watched them in a state of anaesthesia.

He had been in the same dreamlike trance all the morning, in carrying out the processes of shaving himself with all possible closeness, of dressing in fresh clean shirt and underlinen, in stiff grey trousers, light summer waistcoat and grey frock-coat smelling faintly of lavender, of eating a roll even and drinking a cup of coffee, of getting himself to Brook Street. He had woken hypnotised by his act of will of the day before. He was going to go to the Derby, with the Bosworths and Elizabeth. That was a fact, sure as the rising sun. There was nothing that had to be done about it.

The door in front of him opened. The butler recognised him, told him that the party was assembled in the morning-room, led him there, announced him and left him facing Lady Augusta, marvellously resplendent in a huge crinoline of white and salmon pink with hat and parasol to match, and, in a much modester dress of pale blue and white with for once some evidence of hoops in the skirt, Elizabeth.

‘Good morning,’ he said.

‘Good morning, Godfrey,’ Elizabeth and Lady Augusta echoed, as if they had seen him even the day before.

‘Glad you’re in good time,’ Sir Charles added, every bit as matter-of-fact. ‘Can’t make too early a start, you know. All the carriages on the road, let alone the costers’ carts and the omnibuses.’

And they continued for a few minutes more to pat commonplace remarks back and forth. Yet, Godfrey thought, what else was there for them to do? He had said the great thing that was to be said without any words: he had presented himself here at the stated hour. Later there must, of course, come the time when he and Elizabeth would face each other and somehow he would have to tell her what had happened. But at this moment there was certainly nothing to be said.

Nor could he have said anything. He felt himself wrapped still in the cocoon that had formed itself round him from the moment that he had made his so-unexpected promise to Sir Charles in the bank in Lombard Street.

And, in any case, within a few minutes the butler returned to tell them that everything was ready for the departure. They went down, entered the barouche and disposed themselves for the twenty-mile trip.

Godfrey continued, as they made their way out of the capital, to offer small polite remarks from time to time. But he was not there. He felt the sunshine warm his left side. Later the dust, getting into his nostrils, caused him to sneeze. But he was nevertheless in an unbroken state of not-feeling, not-hearing, not-seeing.

Afterwards, thinking back over the day, he was able in fact to recall a good deal of that outward journey. The Surrey countryside, fresh and May-verdant, chestnut blossom and cascading laburnum washing in soft colour on the greenness all around. The horses clipping along neatly together. The enormous broad back of John the coachman sturdily upright

in front of them. The footmen equally upright behind, rocking to and fro like a pair of pillars with the layers of dust gradually creeping up from stockinged thighs to generous breeches to the hems of their short jackets. And, as they approached Epsom itself, the long line of slowly moving vehicles in which they had to take their place, with across hedges and at cottage gates curious onlookers staring up at them, the men often in smocks, the children nearly naked. All this he was able to recall. But at the time none of it at all seemed to make any impression on him.

Afterwards he had been able to see how to these lookers-on the barouche must have appeared as just one more peak in a long moving chain of high mountains, of other barouches, of glossy four-in-hands with roofs packed with swaying colourful passengers, of drags, chaises, victorias, phaetons and brakes. And they would have had troughs too, carts that had been scrubbed free of muck for the occasion, lumbering omnibuses packed full as could be, donkey-drawn vans, even walkers who had set out from London at dawn and were now dusty from head to foot and limping but still infrangibly cheerful. Afterwards he had been able to realise that this was a monster holiday, that Parliament was not sitting and that equally many a coster-barrow was absent from its familiar police-persecuted pavements. But at the time nothing that passed before his eyes caused any thought of any sort to rise in his desensitised mind.

Only with the slower pace and the greater press of people did single events here and there at last force themselves through. Like a flash of sight seen on recovering from a knock-down blow, there suddenly truly impinged on him the spectacle of a public house, with vehicles at rest crammed outside it, with pots of beer winking and flashing in the sun as they were passed from hand to hand, lifted high to omnibus roofs, gigglingly shared with girls in spring carts got up in their utmost finery. Then again blankness. Then as

abruptly he saw and savoured a sign proclaiming 'Stop Here for the Big Pint'. And again oblivion.

But it lasted less long this time. Quite soon there was another flash of vision, one that drew itself out. A long white fence with the words 'Lloyds News One Penny' painted in endless repetition all along it and, above, a swarm of urchins yelling and waving. And not long afterwards in the town itself Benson's Ham-and-Beef Shop rose up before his eyes out of his sea of unseeingness with its pillars of cooked brisket, its piled hillocks of sausage-rolls, its penny loaves brown and glistening, its glinting sun-touched brass window-rail.

By the time they got their first glimpse of the course the sheer crowded cramming press of event was forcing apprehension on him in flashes more and more frequent. As the big barouche, its horses pulling hard now, came to the top of the downs, there all before him, vivid and present and making its impact, was the Grand Stand, white and dazzling, the grass spreading away from them till it met, like rocks emerging from a flowing sea, the clumps of bushes and spinneys of trees, the tents and the booths like so many sun-touched wind-filled yachts and pleasure-boats. And now he saw the people. Sharp-faced swaggering betting men, grooms small and neat with cornflowers in their buttonholes, shopmen and factory hands with the pallor of their everyday occupations irredeemably on their faces, apprentices sporting it in flaming neckties with girls on their arms, applewomen active and rosy-cheeked, and aristocrats at ease and affable under tall tilted hats.

As the carriage nudged and crept its way into the throng, he felt all this boiling and bubbling mass of humanity stirring him, if ever so little. He was still too much an automaton to have any notion what he could say to Elizabeth when he would find himself alone with her, whether that would be in the midst of all this crowd or at a later time. But minute by

minute he knew he was more truly present in the crowd, that he was taking part, sharing with costermonger and duke in the immense festival.

At last Sir Charles shouted up that they were unlikely to find a better position. Then John manoeuvred the big carriage to exactly the angle he thought most advantageous and in a minute the grooms leapt down, one to hold the horses till they could be unharnessed and led away, the other to lower the steps and hold the door open while they got out.

‘Marvellous, marvellous,’ exclaimed Sir Charles, taking a little run up and down on the short springy turf.

He turned to Godfrey.

‘You haven’t been to the Derby, if I’m right, since you came with us as a boy?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘Then you don’t know what you’ve missed. It’s a truly wonderful occasion.’

He took Godfrey by the lapels, a suddenly serious expression on his smiling holiday face.

‘Do you know, my boy, it’s the nearest I ever get to a feeling of what I believe’s called spirituality? The horseflesh, the jockeys, all the people and—and— Oh, the great swell of the downs. They make me feel— Oh, I don’t know what. Never mind, never mind.’

‘No, Charles,’ said Lady Augusta forcefully. ‘You oughtn’t to be abashed by your own feelings. You’re perfectly right. As always. Only you won’t let yourself say what you think. This is a splendid day. It’s unique. Unique. Just look at all the people. All of them. Look.’

They stood and gazed all round them at the huge throng.

And certainly it would be hard to imagine seeing more people, and more variety of persons, than there were within fifty or a hundred yards of where they stood. They ranged from an earl—Godfrey recognised him from having had him

pointed out at the Private View the year before—to half a dozen rank-smelling gypsies. And one of these latter, a strong-faced, red-scarfed, ragged-skirted creature, did not hesitate to approach the being so far removed from her in the social scale and brazenly propose to ‘tell yer fortune for a little lily shilling’. She got a shilling too, and the flower of Old England heard her with darting interest. There were City merchants, thick of waist and ruby-complexioned, feckless young men with race-glasses and betting-books dangling at their sides, loud-talking and opinion-inflated. There were ladies who were miracles of lightness in gossamer skirts with bobbing floating parasols, and there were barefoot children by the dozen, darting and begging. There were bootblacks and clothes-brushing coves. There was, not far away, a fire-eater at work, holding his flaming brand downwards towards his open mouth while his partnering jolly loudly extolled his art, rang like a maniac on a handbell and thrust an upturned hat at every face. There were bankers and barbers, soldiers and statesmen.

And all together they thrust themselves on Godfrey’s perceptions as he stood there, masterfully and unanswerably as the tipster he saw thrusting himself on a florid-faced merchant not scrupling to push his feather-crowned old hat into the very nose of the City man and making a sale too, handing over a grubby envelope and receiving in exchange what looked very like a solid half-crown.

‘Yes,’ said Lady Augusta, catching the direction of his glance. ‘That’s it. That’s Derby Day. And you should go out and breathe it all in. Take Elizabeth with you. Let her feel what it is to enjoy herself. We shan’t lunch for half an hour.’

So off they went. Godfrey gave Elizabeth his arm and they stepped into the swirl of jostling humanity.

Had Lady Augusta, he asked himself, meant to contrive an opportunity for them, hidden in all the noise and

confusion, to talk? Or had she meant no more than she had said? The somewhat surprising advice that they should sample in all its luxuriance and riot of growth this outpouring of what seemed to be the whole best and worst of mighty London?

Impossible to tell. But here they were together and, in a way, alone. He knew that he must say something. He was less numbed now than he had been at the day's start. Derby drunkenness had seen to that. He was sensitive enough to feel for Elizabeth now. To know that he must force himself to find the right words.

But they stumbled when they came.

'Elizabeth, once again I have to beg your forgiveness.'

She turned to him. Her eyes that, a moment before had been dancing to the gaiety all round, much as they had danced when he had thought he could paint them for the Venus Verticordia, now changed at once to a light that was as far removed from that excitement as might be. They radiated a luminous passion.

'There should be no occasion for humbug between the two of us,' she said. 'I forgive you, Godfrey. You must have known that I have never done anything else. Indeed, I'm not sure that I should not be the one asking forgiveness.'

'You?'

'Yes. I told you when you first fled from the thought of our marrying that we could conquer whatever it was that made you fly if only we brought it to the light. I pledged myself to do that with you. And I did not keep my word.'

He made a movement of protest, but she brushed it aside. Around them the immense crowd shouted and chattered, laughed and yelled. They were in a bubble of silence.

'No, I did not keep my word. Oh, there were excuses. We had so much to do, both of us. We were even, I thought, too

happy. But I ought not to have left it in the dark, not even for that much time.'

He felt her appeal pricking at the numbness that remained within him like the pricking in flesh deprived of blood as the health-giving stream begins to flow again. A feeling sharply, even agonisingly painful, but to be welcomed.

'Elizabeth,' he said. 'I must tell—'

But, like a great black blade slicing down between them, at that moment they were swept apart. It was the most trivial of interruptions, simply a performing boy perched high on a pair of stilts nearly losing his balance and swooping down towards them. Elizabeth, catching sight of him, sprang instinctively back. Godfrey could not run towards her without entangling himself in the long stilts. He jumped a pace clear.

The boy, a comic fiery ribbon-fluttering mite of perhaps eight or nine waving a coloured dunce's cap for people to toss pennies into, recovered, straightened up and swung gigantically away. Godfrey hurried over to Elizabeth.

'You're not hurt?'

'No, no. I got well clear.'

They looked at each other.

They both seemed to feel that that momentous exchange could not just be resumed as if it had not been broken off. In Godfrey the painful awakening process had ceased. He could feel the core of numbness in him, thick and convoluted. Elizabeth gave him a look that seemed to be a hand stretching out from a boat fast leaving the shore.

'Godfrey,' she said. 'We will talk. Very soon.'

There was no need for her to say more. He knew that this time her 'soon' would be soon, even if she had humanly weakened at this particular moment. It would come. But in the meantime there was no need to force himself into awakened-ness any longer. She had declared her intention,

and equally by his very coming here he had made his pledge.

Now the huge hubbub of the Derby could swallow them up. They wandered on through it all, unable not to see, to hear, even to smell the pulsation on every side. There was the odour of the very grass at their feet, crushed and stamped on by a thousand other feet. There was the sharpness of sweat and the scents cloud-like round the passing women from the simplicity of rosewater to the redolent sensuality of patchouli. There was the sweetness of beer and the fragrance of wine as people began to lunch. There was the pervasive smell of horse-dung, the sudden tang of a peeled orange, and once the raw reek of sausages and fried onions carried past them in a piece of newspaper by a flaunting many-petticoated girl, at present alone but clearly before many minutes more had gone by to secure herself a male companion.

Godfrey thrust the meaning of her away from him as completely as if she had been a crude colour-printed figure in a cheap illustration and he had taken a pair of scissors and chopped it out. If he was resistant still to the full flood of Elizabeth's world, he was yet more unwilling now to think of that other one.

They wandered on, moving down towards the course itself where a racehorse or two, thin and greyhound-like compared with the sturdy carriage-animals tethered back up on the downs, was making its way along, diminutive silk-shirted jockey perched in the saddle. A bumptious swell, green chiffon scarf round his hat, was telling the world how he intended to triumph over the man working the three-card trick on a small tray propped in front of him. A street-singer, shambling and crow-voiced, was chanting a song from his bundle. A seller of race-cards, dressed in shabby hunting pink, was busy touting his marked wares, 'Buy yer c'rect card 'ere, buy yer c'rect card 'ere.'

Then, pressing their way through the dense-packed horde, they came back to the barouche for lunch. The footman had spread a generous white cloth and on it there was a display of things to eat worthy of the occasion, a huge glossy-crustied pie, lobsters brilliant red and fresh-smelling, chickens, ducks and guineafowl, a large pink ham crisply coated in browned breadcrumbs, luscious green hothouse melons, deep orange pineapples. And there was Roederer to drink, a small case of it packed in ice.

Godfrey would have said that he was too removed from life still to be hungry. But Derby Day had worked on him and he ate enormously and drank his fair share, and a little more, of the bubbling light-as-air champagne.

‘Now,’ said Lady Augusta when they had done, ‘there’s no need to bother with any of the races before the Derby. We shall go and see the fun of the fair.’

Elizabeth must have shown by her expression how unlikely she found the thought of her aunt, that landmark in London Society, visiting the hurly-burly of a fair. And Lady Augusta promptly took her up.

‘Oh, yes, indeed, my dear. No Derby Day is complete for me without seeing the fair. And if I don’t try my hand at winning a pincushion or a musical pear I shall certainly see that Charles does. This is an occasion quite out of the world, you know. And one must take part in it in its own spirit.’

So they pushed their way up a crowded chalky lane up to where the fair was in full and violent swing, leaving the remains of the lunch to the servants and to a couple of dark slinking figures whom Godfrey saw creeping under the carriage to raid for discarded bones and empty bottles. Soon the sound of the wheezing gasping organ-music of the merry-go-rounds greeted them, and did more than greet them. It enveloped them. Godfrey felt the inroads it was making on the last resistant strands within him of that total blank indifference with which he had set out.

‘Watch your pockets and your purses,’ said Sir Charles with immense cheerfulness, as they forced themselves in on the yet more densely packed crowds.

The colours and the clankings swept over them. Shouts and sounds of every sort assailed them. Stentorian men and raucous-voiced women were screaming at one and all to come and see the peepshows, to ride the helterskelters, to win snuffboxes on the Aunt Sallies and dolls on the hoop-la, to buy the floating bright-coloured balloons, to take their luck on the Wheel of Fortune, to watch the glove-boxing and the bare-fisted sparring, to slaver over the Snake Lady and her twisting writhing coverings, to see the Chicksaw from the Island of High Barbaree eat rats all alive-o. Bells rang, whistles shrieked, drums thumped and screams and laughter fell down on them from the switchbacks of the Railway Ride and emerged echoing from the spectre-painted tent of the Ghost Journey.

Sir Charles threw a dozen sticks at the coconut shy, and missed every time. Lady Augusta entered the peepshow of the House of Commons with Elizabeth and came out declaring it ‘a great deal better than the real thing’. Godfrey tried the Test-Your-Strength machine and very nearly rang the bell. Elizabeth submitted to have her age guessed—‘Do you Carry Your Age Well?’—and laughingly declined to take what she ought to have won when the hoarse-voiced yellow-toothed proprietor told her she could not be a day over twenty.

‘Come in, come in, come in.’ It was the crier outside the booth advertising not merely ‘The World’s Only Two-Headed Dwarf’ but also ‘See the Pig-Faced Boy’ and ‘The One and Only Elephant-Legged Girl’. They walked on laughing with everybody around them. Then at the tent of the ‘Show of Shows’ with its barker in the full regalia of an Indian brave holding out the promise in purest Cockney of ‘Cold steel against warm flesh, cold steel against warm flesh’ Sir

Charles suddenly bawled in Godfrey's ear, 'Come on, my boy, we'll see this.' They went up to pay their tuppence apiece and the Cockney brave, seeing Godfrey hesitate, whispered confidentially, 'Naked as the day she was born, sir, naked as the day she was born.'

He followed Sir Charles into the oven-like airless tent with reluctance. He feared the spectacle would prick up thoughts he was not prepared to harbour, cherishing the last of his numbness. And it turned out that if the barker's claim was true children were born into this world wearing dirty pink fleshings. So a wave of amusement left that unfeeling centre mercifully intact and he watched happily while another Red Indian threw a dozen knives thunkingly into the board beside the steadfastly indifferent target.

The shouting, the noise, the conflicting music, the bustle, the heat and the smells enveloped them once more.

And then, standing to take breath for a moment beside a great clanking music-squealing roundabout, its bright red, yellow and green patterns swirling along past his head, he saw of all the people he had ever known in the wide world the one he would have wanted perhaps to see least of all on this particular day. Lisa.

She was on the other side of the noisy revolving merry-go-round and some distance beyond it. But even through its bobbing and ducking gold and silver trimmed horses with their thick horsehair tails swinging and swirling, even though dazzled by the mirror-starred central column flashing as it turned in the bright sunlight, he had no doubt that the one glimpse he had had of her before a boy with a bunch of bright gas-filled balloons obscured his view had not betrayed him. It was Lisa.

He remembered her saying once that she longed to go to the Derby and had never been. Had he promised to take her? Almost certainly.

And with the idea of her having a companion he realised that he had seen more than just Lisa herself. There had been someone beside her, his arm round her waist. He had had an impression, right across the swinging patterns of the roundabout, of a grin, a doggish grin that was faintly familiar. And then he remembered. The carpenter she had been dancing with at the Holborn Casino. What was his name? Joe. Joey. She had said then that the fellow squired her whenever he could afford it.

But there had been something too about the way he was holding her. He was not, as he had been at the Casino, staking a claim. He was exercising an air of proprietorship.

They were married. He had a sudden and total conviction of the fact.

‘Come on, my dear fellow. Time we went back to the carriage. They’ve rung the bell to clear the course. And I want to give a sov’ or two to the bookmakers.’

It was Sir Charles.

‘Coming, sir, coming.’

He set off with them. But his thoughts were elsewhere.

Lisa married. Did that mean she had deserted the world of the underside, her world, the world she had led him to? He felt curiously cheated.

Had the underside then lost its power over him too, its power to tug him down? He hardly wanted to question himself over it. He did not want to know now whether that pull still existed, no more than he wanted to know how firmly he was once again in the grip of the world of engagements and appointments.

He wanted not to have to decide. He wanted to be as he was now for ever, in a time removed from that unending struggle between top and miry bottom as this day seemed to be removed from it, a miraculous mingling.

But he could not see how that could be. Tomorrow indeed, with Elizabeth likely to redeem her promise to search with

him into his depths, he would have to make the decision between the two worlds. And it would be a decision that in every day that followed he would have in practice to make again and again. Each day would be a day when he could either live life with Elizabeth, a life looking upwards, or could choose to leave her, to visit St Giles, or some low rents in Wapping or Shadwell or a house like the one in Blue Cross Street. And if he did that he would be opting for the underside.

He had fallen behind the others and began to push his way through the crowds streaming towards the course in an effort to catch up. But from beside him there came now such an insistent thrusting-in chorus of noise that he could not but give it his full attention. It was the bookmakers. Up on their stools under their broad slogan-painted banners, they were shouting the odds for the great race, dinning it inescapably into his ears that the climax of the day had arrived.

‘The Der-bee. The Der-bee. Come on, come on. Roll up, roll up. Place your money here for the Der-bee. The Der-bee. Here. Here. Here.’

Thin men and fat men, tall men and short men, pale-faced sharp men and bellicose red-nosed men, they were all one. They were all loud, all pressing, all dressed in startlingly dazzling clothes, with coats of screaming checks, with great staring bunches of flowers in their buttonholes, with neckties of the vividest greens, yellows and blues, with tall hats of aggressive whiteness and big bold cards in them proclaiming that here stood Jack Jones of London, that here just as foursquare stood Tom Smith of Epsom, that here stood Harry Brown of Ascot.

‘What can I do for you, sir?’ ‘For a win or a place, a win or a place.’ ‘Ten to one bar two.’ ‘Two to one the favourite.’ ‘Place your bets here on the Der-bee.’ ‘The Der-bee.’ ‘The Der-bee.’

And it was this noise, this insistence, this brute repetition of the mere name of the great event that finally won him completely over. It penetrated him to the very inmost core. It awoke him finally from his numbness to the day and all that it was. To the Derby. An event removed from everything. A thing apart.

He would bet on the Derby. That was it. He would bet. He must bet.

But he found that he knew nothing about a single horse in the race. Could he run forward, find Sir Charles and ask him for a likely winner? No, it would betray for his benefactor the spirit of the occasion.

A name. A name. He must hit on a name.

And at that moment, diving and plunging his way past, there came a short out-of-breath individual in a green velveteen coat with an expression of frantic anxiety on his puffy red face.

‘Chair-o-screwro, Chair-o-screwro,’ he was gasping.

He almost flung himself in front of one of the bookmakers.

‘What are you giving on Chair-o-screwro?’ he demanded.

‘Chiaroscuro?’ The bookmaker, after a day of dealing with the name, had his tongue round it rather better. ‘Why, I’ll lay you fifty to one.’

‘Done,’ said the red-faced individual.

And sweating and anxious still he produced half a sovereign from where it had been waiting ready in his pocket. It vanished to join the other coins clinking in the big bag bouncing on the bookmaker’s ample stomach.

Chiaroscuro, Godfrey thought. A painter’s word. The mingling of light and shade. Well, this day was that. Let it be an omen.

He took a five pound note from his wallet and went up to the bookmaker.

‘You’ll have to be brisk, sir. They’re off in a minute.’

'Yes, yes. All right. Five pounds on Chiaroscuro.'

'To win, sir?'

'Yes, to win. To win.'

Chapter Seventeen

They watched the race from the barouche, standing up in it and getting an excellent view over the packed mass of heads stretching down in front of them to the course itself. Godfrey had arrived only just in time. He had felt already enormously excited, far more so than warranted by the risking of five pounds on a mere horse race.

Hardly had he mounted the barouche than there came one united breath-bated shout, 'They're off!' It was difficult at first to make out much of the progress of the affair and the huge crowd was oddly subdued, not far from total silence. But soon he was able to see the horses in the distance, a long cohering mass appearing for the most part chestnut brown in colour with the brilliant flecks of the jockeys' silks, purple, green, blue, red, yellow. Then at the front the mass broke up somewhat into individual moving objects. But for the most part it progressed as one body, not seeming at a distance to be going very fast.

But soon the tense quiet of the crowd rose in a slow crescendo into one long and steady continuing roar. The horses rounded Tattenham Corner. There was a sudden gasp, almost a howl, as one jockey, taking the bend too daringly, had his mount's hooves slip from beneath him and came crashingly down.

And then, with unexpected abruptness, the end was near. The roar of the huge throng had become frantic now, urgent, intense, concentrated. Two horses were distinctly ahead of the rest of the field, the two no doubt against which the bookmakers had been offering only short odds. But the pack behind was still within striking distance, and now their speed could be seen, could be felt, as arrow-fast. From their thundering hooves the dust spurted and rose. And behind again the crowd, leaping over the barriers, plunged in their wake, a rushing black river bore. To either

side of the pounding speeding field hats rose high everywhere, lifted in hands, raised vehemently on sticks. On the other side, Godfrey was half-aware that the five thousand faces in the Grand Stand had craned forward as one.

Now—it all happened so quickly that Godfrey hardly knew whether he had seen it or not—just as the finishing-post came within reach the two contending animals out in front seemed to tire and slacken speed almost at the same moment and out of the solid ruck behind a third horse darted, joined them, overtook them in the very instant that they flashed past the post. But had it joined them only, or had it actually got in front?

But from the sound of the crowd, a sort of appalled joyous miracle-acknowledging mighty yelp spreading across two hundred thousand throats, it seemed that the two universally fancied animals had indeed been beaten, that the totally unexpected had occurred.

And then, and then there came to Godfrey's ears a murmur. It was a low questioning murmur, which just for a little he refused to let himself recognise for what it was. But then he had to admit it: it was the word 'Chiaroscuro' repeated in a hundred different pronunciations, tossed this way and that, but undeniably said and there. It was the universally exchanged comment on the out-of-account animal from way down in the list of the thirty or more runners that had been the one to dart forward at the last second, to see the two battling champions tire and to strike. It was the great general marvelling that Chiaroscuro at fifty to one had taken the Derby.

From behind the Grand Stand a cloud of exploding grey rose up. The pigeons were leaving with their message for every part of the land.

Thereafter all was revel and confusion. There were other races, but Godfrey was never able really to remember

whether he had backed horses in them, though there certainly had been much talk about the importance of choosing names connected with the art of painting. But had there not also been, Godfrey was to ask himself, some reservation in his mind over this. Some notion that it was not a connection with painting that was necessary in a winner's name but something else? What else? He could not think.

The day was to vanish for him. Its slow unfolding beginning, that sudden breaking into a state of lucid joy just before the race itself and the long aftermath in which that state had continued, were to disappear in his mind almost from the very next day. They did not vanish away to nothing, but vanished like some object that has been taken, wrapped in tissue and placed in a trunk in a dusty loft, continuing to exist but cut off from the ordinary run of life.

Odd little sights he had seen were to come back to him at intervals for years afterwards, like small self-contained dreams. An acrobat fantastically whirling round horizontally on top of a tall striped pole. The heir to the Throne himself making his way through the dense crowd in a black carriage, portly and flushed of face. A girl, white-faced, shawled, barefoot, with just under one eye, extraordinarily distinct, the mark of a boot-heel, a bluey-purple impress. A tall thin man wearing, despite the sunshine, a long greenish overcoat, marching about holding high a banner with, stitched on its yellowy-white cloth in red letters, the words 'Repent In Time'. And, like a thread running through the whole, the accommodation men outside their urine-smelling sacking booths with their insistent parrot cries of "Commodation, 'Commodation' as if what they had to sell was the prize buy of all amid the wide people-thronged downs.

But of the day itself, when he sought to recall it, he had only a general impression of his state of almost

disembodied openness, of accepting and taking in everything that went on around him. And he had the impression, too, that Elizabeth, Lady Augusta and Sir Charles had all shared in this feeling. Everything for them as for him was bathed in the same joyous flow.

Even, when they encountered the impromptu after-the-race fights, the gore seemed stage gore, the peltings with chicken carcasses and clumps of snatched turf seemed bubble-battles, the parties clambering down from omnibuses and hammering it out line against line seemed like dancers only, though they left bloody noses and mouths with missing teeth. The drunkenness, from the wild imbibing of port and ale, sherry and stout, all hopelessly intermingled, did not seem anything other than a widespread gaiety, even when it produced its quota of drooping violently vomiting figures.

It had been the same on the slow crowded road back, lively at every moment with the over-riding sound of rippling coach-horns, an impossible jumble all the way of vehicles of every kind infinitely worse controlled than on the journey out. There were spills of all sorts. Wheels cracked and crashed in masses of broken spokes. But all that the disasters gave rise to, paradoxically, was a sense of well-being. There were more wild battles, between dandies on the tops of drags armed with pea-shooters and costers on carts down below pelting back all the knock-em-down prizes from the fair. But when these led to bare-fisted brawls, strident curses, the rending of wood and the screaming neighing of horses they seemed only to add again to the joyousness that bubbled everywhere. Men may have been left lying unconscious by the roadside, and women too, but it was the absurdities that called the tune, a brake making its way through the gathering dusk with tiny miniature chamber-pots all a-dangle from strings above it, the dozens of little naked dolls bought on the downs and now

decorating hats and coat-lapels or being tossed from one vehicle to another.

Onwards and homewards they rolled. The soft early summer air, full of sweet night scents, was all around them. Sweeping branches of great trees, still in their light and delicate earliest foliage, brushed revellers on the tops of omnibuses and smart drags alike. Couples clasped each other in mock fear and giggled nuzzlingly.

But at length the multitude of conveyances of all sorts did thin out and a faster rate of progress became possible. Sir Charles directed them to Richmond where he had booked a room at the Star and Garter for dinner. Godfrey, though never very much in wine, remembered little of this occasion. Flags hanging in the darkness as they arrived, heavy and rich-coloured in the lamplight. A table with a strikingly white cloth and dishes by the dozen being placed upon it. The pop of champagne corks.

Only one thing stayed firmly in his mind, a counter note at the end of the whole lifted-out-of-time day. As they finished dinner, Sir Charles, leaning across to offer him a cigar, had spoken in a suddenly quiet voice.

‘My boy, I’ve been thinking about that date.’

The wedding. At once he was alert. Sir Charles had said the date must be fixed before this day was over. Very well then, let him fix it. There could be no question of backing away from it now.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Some time in October, I think. Augusta will never have made all her arrangements for anything earlier now. Shall we say the twentieth?’

‘The twentieth of October. Yes, sir, that will be admirable for me if it is convenient to Elizabeth.’

‘Good. The twentieth. That’s settled.’

True to a hasty promise he had made to Elizabeth as the barouche set her down after their post-Derby dinner, Godfrey turned into Gower Street at a little before half-past nine next morning.

Already the day before seemed distant to him. But he had been keenly conscious, as he had walked briskly through the morning streets up from Blackfriars, that the period of time from Derby Day to October the twentieth was short, a little less than five months. In five months' time he would be married to Elizabeth. He would have made the solemn pledge in the marriage service to cleave to her only. But would he be able to keep that pledge? He knew with certainty this morning that, for all that he would not let himself think of the slightest detail of his life until so recently in St Giles and elsewhere or of the time spent earlier with Lisa, the underside yet held the power tumblingly to seduce him.

Would Elizabeth's surgeon-like knife, the promised surgery that he was going now to meet, be able to cut out whatever force it was within him that gave the dark world its power? She had been certain that by bringing searching light to his trouble it would be possible to dispel it utterly. Was she right?

He walked at a steady pace along the neat-fronted houses of the street. Here and there, as he glanced up at the cheerful sky, he caught glimpses of the steady activity going on behind the trim façades. Windows were being thrown briskly up to let the fresh morning air into bedrooms. He saw sheets billowing high like the sails of sea-sparkling yachts as maids in sturdy-armed pairs shook them up and down before putting them crisply back in place. Once he caught sight of the striped cover of a mattress as it was lumbered into the air in process of receiving its daily turning. He thought with pleasure of this unchanging routine, as it went on in houses like these, as it had gone on

in the houses where he had been brought up as a boy. Beds made fresh every morning. The task carried out always to the same exact routine. Sweetness and freshness, order and regularity. Yes, it was a good world. He wanted to belong to it. To belong there as long as beds would continue to be made. But would the black seed of betrayal be able to be excised from him?

Before very much longer he would see.

He came to Elizabeth's house, mounted the steps, rang at the bell.

The landlady, spruce and brisk in apron and cap, opened promptly.

'Miss Hills told me you would be calling, sir,' she said. 'She's expecting you. Would you have the kindness to walk in? I'm just taking breakfast up to Miss Watkyn. She's suffering this morning, poor thing, and Miss Hills told her she must stay in bed.'

Godfrey smiled to himself. Elizabeth had evidently dealt with all her accustomed efficiency with the problem of the unwanted presence of Adelaide Watkyn at their coming tête-à-tête.

With a quiet knock he entered the sitting-room. It was like coming home after a long and arduous sea-voyage. There was no fire burning in the grate this summery morning but everywhere there was the gleam of fresh polishing and each item was neatly in its exact place. The two armchairs were one on either side of the mantelpiece, Elizabeth's with her reading-stand to its left, Miss Watkyn's with her round firescreen to its right. There was the carpet with its familiar pattern, bright and fresh. There was the table with its heavy cloth, shaken no doubt not an hour earlier as it was shaken every morning. And on the table were the well-remembered piles of Reports and Returns, Blue Books and White Papers, different of course from the ones that had been there when he was last in this room but in essence the same.

And there was Elizabeth. She was standing by the window, wearing a dress in a fine grey-and-white stripe, very businesslike yet serenely pretty.

‘Godfrey, good morning,’ she said in that quiet voice with the slight American intonation that seemed to him always like the low music of a clear stream.

‘Good morning, Elizabeth. None the worse for the excitements of yesterday?’

‘No,’ she answered. ‘No.’

She sounded thoughtful, a little surprised, as if she had plainly expected to have suffered from all that that extraordinary day had been, and now found that it was rather the other way round.

‘I had a word with Sir Charles last night after dinner,’ he said. ‘He suggested October the twentieth as their most convenient day for the wedding. I said that it was entirely suitable to me. But ...’

He left unmentioned the obstacle that lay between them and which might yet mean that there would be no wedding.

Elizabeth looked at him directly.

‘I told you yesterday,’ she said, ‘that there is no point in pretences between you and me. I love you, Godfrey. Perhaps I always shall. But unless we can go together into what it was that made you run from the prospect of our marrying, go as deep as we find we must, then I do not see that we can marry.’

He looked at the pattern of the carpet at his feet. Now it had come, the moment. He found himself empty of words as a scoured pail.

‘Godfrey, my dear,’ Elizabeth said, her grey eyes bending down on him, ‘believe me, if we can bring this to the light those shadows that have seemed so dark will no longer be there. I promise you that.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes. I think they will be banished. I know that they will. I want them banished.’

Into his mind there came the recollection of the policeman who had found him at the end of the day he had walked so long in dockland, of the rays of that bullseye lantern that had shown him eventually the way that had led directly back to this very room. Yes, a bullseye ray of light, soft but searching, that was what he wanted again now.

And, hardly knowing anything else was there, he stifled the remembrance of the other feeling with which he had greeted the bullseye: the dislike.

‘Then,’ said Elizabeth, standing by the window still, with the street bright in the morning sunshine behind her, ‘you must, quite simply, tell me everything.’

‘Yes.’

‘You ran away from the responsibilities before you on that day after we had been to Greenwich, just as you had run away after the opera?’

Godfrey felt as if he was raising his head to look straight into a searing heat.

‘It wasn’t simply that,’ he said, wishing there were other words to say.

‘Then what was it, my dear?’

She was looking at him with such evident and willing sympathy that the confession suddenly was almost easy.

‘I was not simply running away: I was running towards.’
‘Towards?’

‘Towards the life I led when I was not with you. Towards—I don’t know why—a life of darkness and squalor.’

‘But where was this? Where did you go?’

The surgeon’s scalpel gently lifted another tiny layer of flesh.

‘To a place in St Giles. There and elsewhere.’

‘St Giles? That’s Seven Dials, isn’t it? I’ve heard a good deal about that from Mr Balneal. But, Godfrey, it’s appalling,

filthy, as bad as any of the places we care for. And worse. Far more morally sordid.'

'Yes. Yes, it is all you say.'

Elizabeth said nothing, but after a moment walked over to the table with its piles of solidly statistics-crammed reports and laid her hand on one of them as if she wished to draw strength from all that had been made clear and lucid.

'My dear,' she said, 'I suspected that it must be a woman. But that it should have been a woman of that sort, you who in your painting aspire so high.'

She yet turned and looked at him, forcing her head up.

Sheer admiration brought it out of him then.

'Elizabeth. No, I must tell it to you all. It was not a woman: it was women, many of them.'

Her grey gaze did not falter even at this.

'No,' she said. 'I had not foreseen that. My dear, of course I have thought about this. I had asked myself, lying awake, what it was that could have taken you away. I had accepted that there might be a woman, even that there must be a woman. I had known that she could hardly be a person of the kind that you should aspire to. But I had not, even at the worst, imagined this.'

Godfrey saw, holding his face steady to hers, that crystal tears were swimming in those lustrous eyes.

'No,' she said, lifting her head a little. 'No, you have told me what the facts of the case are, and I will accept them. Even these.'

He took an impulsive step towards her and put out his hands. He wanted to offer her support. The spectacle of her distress affected him to trembling.

Then he checked himself. She might recoil at his touch. She ought to recoil at his touch.

But she saw his suddenly imposed hesitation, evidently guessed at once the reason for it. And, with a solemnity that

was like an oath-taking, she extended her hand to him.

He took it in both of his and clasped it hard. They stood in silence. Outside a man was calling 'Knives to grind, knives to grind.' In the room the air was still as if it had been transfixed in a painting.

At last Elizabeth spoke.

'My dearest one, I cannot go on now. I feel the weakness, but I cannot say anything more. Will you—Godfrey, will you let it rest for a little?'

He released his grasp of her hand. It fell to her side. He saw that she had gone white with exhausting emotion.

'Sit down, my dear. Sit here. Shall I ring for your landlady? Ought you to take something?'

She let him lead her to a chair and sat in it huddled. But she would not let him do more for her, and he stood watching her while gradually the colour came back to her cheeks. At last she straightened her back and looked up at him.

'Godfrey, it must be soon.'

'Yes. It shall be.'

'Dearest, tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow.'

They had arranged that Elizabeth should come to Gillingham Place. Miss Watkyn could not be encouraged to keep to her bed every day. They had fixed on nine o'clock, because Elizabeth had an appointment to go with a Medical Officer of Health on a tour of inspection.

Godfrey was waiting to receive her by quarter to nine, having already breakfasted, instructed Billy to make sure the studio was clean and tidy and gone for a stroll along the river while the tidying took place. Now the floor was swept, the chairs banged free of dust and the Venus Verticordia had been taken from its clamps on the easel and hidden away out of sight.

Elizabeth arrived to the minute.

'It's Miss 'ills, sir,' Billy announced, opening the creaky door of the studio with a flourish.

Elizabeth looked round as she came in.

'Good boy, Billy,' she said. 'You're keeping it all very well.'

Billy's face beneath his tow-mop hair shone with pleasure.

'Can we go out on to the balcony?' Elizabeth asked when he had gone. 'I came here in a closed-up fly and I'd like the fresh air.'

With some difficulty Godfrey got out on to the wide balcony overhanging the river. It had not been used since the autumn and the door to it was jammed with rags against the cold. He stepped on to the wide boards and tentatively jumped up and down.

'It seems safe still,' he said to Elizabeth. 'Step out. You were right, it's very pleasant.'

It was. A light breeze was blowing from across the river, a little chilly but invigorating. The sun was shining at intervals as banks of white cloud moved across the sky. Out on the wide brown surface of the water boats were moving, briskly or slowly according to their nature, a fussy penny steamer belching smoke, barges swinging majestically as they made their way upstream with the tide.

They leant on the balcony's wooden rail and stared down at the swirling water under them.

'There's more to be said between the two of us,' Elizabeth began after a few moments.

'I suppose there is,' Godfrey answered with reluctance. 'Though surely now you know almost everything.'

'No, dearest. You told me that you were not running away from your responsibilities in the world but that you were running towards—towards those low women.'

'Yes. I felt that.'

'You wanted them? Those and no other?'

He felt the strongest unwillingness to plunge his hand once more into the scalding water.

‘Yes, yes,’ he said, with an abruptness. ‘I told you. I did feel that. I felt it and that is all there is to be said about it.’

‘No, my dearest, we must go deeper. If we leave it at that, it is going to happen again. Is it not?’

She turned from her contemplation of the swirling river and looked at him.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, it could happen again. My dear, I do not want it to. I mean at this moment with all the force that is in me that it should not happen. But I can see no reason why that pull will not one day prove too strong for me still.’

‘Godfrey, it will not if we can get to the roots of it. We can pluck it out. We can hold up those dark roots to the light and see them wither.’

Her eyes poured out that sweeping-all-before-it radiance. He straightened his shoulders.

‘Yes, we must try. I see that. I see it.’

‘Then, dearest, look at it. What was it that you found in those women? What was it exactly?’

He tried to produce an answer. But the words necessary were unsayable, even within his own mind.

He stood in silence, staring out at the lively river scene in front of him, seeing nothing.

‘Dearest?’

He rounded on her.

‘You cannot understand,’ he burst out. And then, snatching at the excuse, he added: ‘No woman could understand.’

‘You forget what I am. I am a doctor.’

The rage ebbed from him.

‘Oh, I know,’ he said quietly reasoning. ‘I know that you are acquainted with every part of the human body, of the male body, even the most intimate. Yet I cannot believe that

you can truly understand how it is necessary for a man to give rein to the urges of his sexual nature. Yes, of course those are supposed not to be let go uncontrolled. Oh yes, the clergymen tell us it is our duty to remain chaste, chaste till we have income enough to marry, to provide a wife with a home and a carriage. A carriage indeed. And in all this time we are expected not to have bodily urges.'

He felt he was arguing well, that he was putting a good case. Yet was this the case he ought to be putting? Was he not evading the true issue?

'My dearest,' Elizabeth said. 'Believe me, I can see that complete chastity for so long as that is perhaps an unreal ideal.'

'Perhaps?' he answered quickly. 'I tell you that when men are talking freely amongst themselves, without any cant, it pretty soon becomes quite clear that there is no complete chastity. Why, I don't believe a single young man of any sort, curate, Roman monk, be he what he may, is ever totally chaste. Oh, they may avoid going to women, but if chastity means altogether refraining from sexual acts then I tell you they don't achieve it, not one of them.'

'They practise masturbation?' Elizabeth said.

Godfrey turned from his contemplation of the brown swift-running water below and looked at her in awe. Was there another woman in London, in the wide world, who could have referred to such a subject with such simplicity and calmness?

He must fling himself on to this pure searching stream. He must give her his full trust. Let her probe, unfold, go where she would.

And in the meantime he answered her with a frankness which he hoped equalled her own.

'Yes. That is what I meant. Masturbation. The vice is practised, I truly believe, by every man there is at some time or another.'

‘Very well then,’ Elizabeth said, also turning from looking down at the river to face him directly. ‘Why then, if that is the case, did you not content yourself with that? Why instead those terrible forays into the dirt?’

It was here. The question had been asked. But he could not bring himself even yet to pronounce his answer. A last evasion presented itself to him.

‘Why not masturbation,’ he said. ‘Surely you, as a doctor, know the dangers of that? You must be aware of the effects of the vice, the loss of— of—’

‘Of semen?’

‘Yes. That is the word.’

He must, he must, entrust himself to this lighthouse beam of a soul.

‘Opinions differ as to those dangers,’ Elizabeth went on steadily ‘Did you know that?’

‘No. No, I did not,’ he answered, disconcerted.

‘Oh, I grant you the majority of medical men will tell you that the human male has only so much semen to expend, that the results of excess and of improper substitutes for sexual intercourse can only be degeneration and may even be death. But I believe that the men who argue thus are blinding themselves. They will not look at the facts. Does the saliva exist in limited quantities only? No, every person who has studied physiology will tell you that enough saliva is manufactured by the body for whatever purposes it is needed while there is sufficient liquid taken in to make it possible. But when it comes to the production of semen they cease to see simple scientific processes at work and throw themselves instead into phantasmagorias of superstition.’

Godfrey turned away and looked out over the Thames. It was not that his admiration for Elizabeth had been checked by the frankness of her words. Far from it. The way she had cut her path through so much nettle-sour undergrowth had

only increased his wonder. But she had cut that path, and now she had reached the heart of the matter.

‘But, dearest,’ came the quiet voice, with that individual warmth of American in it. ‘But, dearest, even if you have been under a misapprehension about the results of masturbation, that does not account for what it was that you did. Indeed, if fears for your bodily health kept you from that, how much more so should they have kept you from the very real dangers that come from associating with women who go from man to man indiscriminately?’

‘Yes,’ he answered, his face turned to the distance. ‘I was aware of those dangers, though by some blessed chance I seem to have escaped them. And, yes, they even acted not as a discouragement to me but as an added attraction.’

He stopped. Had he not nearly said it now? Was not that it?

Elizabeth was silent, as if she sensed that there needed no extra pressure from her now.

Out in the river, a police cutter, its oars flashing in perfect time, made its way swiftly up towards Waterloo Bridge. A suicide? The thought passed across the surface of Godfrey’s mind.

Then, almost somnambulistically, he spoke again.

‘That is it, Elizabeth. That is what I have to tell you. That the very lowness of it all, the very evil, the dark itself, exercised the fascination for me. It is the underside. It is the underside that calls.’

He was holding the thick wooden rail of the balcony in front of him as if he would crush it like spun sugar in his grip.

‘Yes,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Yes, now it is there. Now it is out. We have seen it, my dearest one. We have seen it clearly. Now it can die.’

Godfrey turned to her, slowly and wearily.

‘It will die?’ he asked, as if the question hardly mattered.

‘Yes,’ Elizabeth answered, all light, all confidence. ‘Yes, it will die. It is dying now, with every minute in the air. And, my darling, now nothing stands between us. Nothing ever shall.’

So, Godfrey thought like a shipwrecked sailor picking up articles likely to be of everyday use as he stood on the strand after the great storm, so Elizabeth and I are to be married on October the twentieth next. It will be, unless Lady Augusta’s arrangements go astray, at St George’s Church, Hanover Square. The Bishop of Stanmore will officiate.

Elizabeth had declared to him that no obstacle any longer existed. The great surgical operation had been conducted and the patient was still alive. It was over. From now on the whole tenor of his life would be quite different. It would be. It must be. The light had brought its brightness to the innermost depths and all now must be well.

Chapter Eighteen

Snow. How extraordinary that snow should choose to fall as early as October the twentieth. Almost unheard of, but there it was, a deep fall after a week of colder and colder weather. There must be three inches or more of it, Godfrey thought, stepping with care out of the jobbing-stables victoria as it arrived in front of St George's Church just around the corner from Hanover Square.

The pavements outside the church and the steps up to the heavy portico had been well swept. But large flakes were still descending and he had to cross to the shelter as quickly as he could. Yet, once there, he could not deny himself the pleasure of standing and watching the crystal-white fluff as it swooped and danced downwards in the cold air.

It was beautiful, wonderfully beautiful, pure and out of this world. Yes, perhaps after all snow on the wedding day was to be welcomed. It was a benediction. Nature was bestowing her most intricate and lovely gift.

And it had transformed the whole swarming city. All the mire and the beastliness had vanished. In the space of the hours of darkness they had been blotted out under this extraordinary carpet of soft and infinitely pure whiteness. All the roar and the rush had been stilled. As he had driven up from Blackfriars there had not been a single carriage or cab, waggon or omnibus to be seen. Everywhere there had been a profound and magical silence, broken only by the shouts of the occasional party of boys snow-balling, their cries made crystal pure by the stillness of the air. There had been only these and the foot passengers with business too important to wait, heavily great-coated trudging figures.

It was almost as if, he thought, laughing at himself for it, as if the whole great rush and whirl of London had come to a pause, a moment of awe, because of the ceremony that was

about to take place at its heart. As if all the city's millions had halted in wonder at the solemnity and the marvel of the joining of himself and Elizabeth.

And for this moment of moments had not the whole scene been transformed? The daily mud-spattered surfaces of the streets with their dirt and their dung had been replaced by the infinite purity of the snow. The houses, that yesterday had been ordinary structures and tomorrow would be so again, were for this morning fairy palaces, each lintel and cornice with its line of pure white, every roof no longer grimy with soot but clothed in this heaven-sent mantle. The trees that an autumn's fogs had left sodden and drooping-leaved were suddenly again things of unparalleled beauty, each branch and twig bearing in the stillness its delicate burden of crystal whiteness.

He stood letting it all pour into him, the miracle that had happened.

And then at last, reluctantly, he turned and entered the church. But it was time. Time for the ceremony that the whole teeming noisome city had been hushed and beautified to bear witness to.

He advanced along the wide aisle, its parquered floor serene in front of him. He took his place in the front pew on the right-hand side. And soon the organ in the gallery behind began to play the Wedding March.

Tears blinked up into his eyes. Those absurd and familiar strains. He had expected to feel like laughing at them. But, no, what was this he was feeling? This fullness in the throat and welling-up in the eyes? It could be only joy, pure joy.

The jolly booming organ notes were a barque bearing him along on the great tide of ordinary human destiny, ordinary yet extraordinary. He was about to be married, to join himself to another, to take part with her in the whole onward striving of humankind. He would become a father, the father of sons and daughters, each to grow up in his or

her turn, to marry, to have children of their own. He was making an affirmation for solidity. He was placing himself at the beginning of a whole spreading network, sure and true, growing down from beneath him, from beneath himself and Elizabeth. The roots of society. Ridiculous in this rollicking triumphant music to feel so much. Ridiculous, but so.

Then for an instant a tiny sinister mocking trickle ran through his mind across the path of the great swelling stream. Reject it all, it said.

Could he? Could he cut and run for it even now? There was still time before Elizabeth came into the church to slip through the narrow door leading to the vestry which the Rector had pointed out the day before when he had gone over the ceremony, to slip through and out down the narrow flight of stone steps into Maddox Street.

And then what? Lisa? No, not Lisa. She too was married.

Had she too then experienced this extraordinary happening? No doubt she had, though hardly on such a scale. What was it? Twenty baskets of flowers from Jobstick's for the church? And Lady Augusta taking firm charge of the trousseau, ordering on the grand scale. What was that list Elizabeth had ruefully shown him? One dozen nightdresses, one dozen chemises, one dozen pairs of longcloth drawers, four longcloth petticoats, one dress petticoat and four flannel petticoats, six patent Merino vests, six dozen pocket handker—

Behind him he heard a general muted gasp. Elizabeth. She must have just entered the church. Too late now to run. And of course he had had no desire to. He was embarked. The great tide was bearing him along and he was riding and riding on it.

She was advancing down the aisle towards him. A triumphant figure in white satin frothed over with lace like the spume from seas carved through and ridden over. Framing her face, so serious, so handsome, was more lace.

In her hand were flowers, a bouquet of something small, white and chaste. And, surely, there were snowflakes on her too. In her hair. On her shoulders. Sparkling in the moment before they melted with more brilliance, a cleaner purity, than any jewels.

She was on the arm of Sir Charles, wonderfully correct in his morning-dress, cradling in his other arm his tall grey hat. Was it the one he had worn at the Derby? Or another bought for the occasion? Behind them he could see the two young bridesmaids, distant cousins drummed up by Lady Augusta.

Godfrey smiled down towards the triumphant sailing snowsparkling figure.

Oh yes, he was blessed. He felt it in every corner of himself. That this woman should be coming to join herself in matrimony to him. Coming with all her gifts. Her courage. Her steadfastness. Her grey clear penetrating gaze. Her beauty, because she had a grave beauty that set at naught to his mind all the carved perfection of the most pointed-out pinnacles of Society.

The procession advanced. When Elizabeth came level with his pew he stepped out and went up with her to the steps of the altar.

The Bishop of Stanmore, all rosy benignity, frocked in authority, began to pronounce the words of the service.

‘... to join together this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony ...’

‘... satisfy man’s carnal lusts and appetites like brute beasts that have no understanding, but reverently, discreetly ...’

Well, he supposed that he had satisfied his lust. Had it been like a brute beast? Best not to think at all what it had been like. And when it came to himself and Elizabeth? ‘Discreetly, advisedly, soberly’? Not the moment to confront that now.

Think instead of the guests. Of Lady Augusta, podgy and marvellously magnificent in a crinoline of vibrating heliotrope with trimmings of rich black lace and a hat that would not be outmatched anywhere this year. Of Adelaide Watkyn, who had sworn that the news of the marriage would prostrate her for ever and whom he had yet glimpsed in a high state of agitation in a pew not far from the front. Of Lady Emmeline Otway, on his side, prudishly contriving he felt sure to be here without once considering the final purpose of the ceremony. Of all his other far-off cousins and family friends who had appeared from country houses and parsonages, from nearby Hertfordshire, from East Anglia in their dozens, from Wales, from Scotland. Of all the numerous Bosworth connections bulking out Elizabeth's side, only Miss Josephine Marcham in retreat from the raw air missing from among them. They had all come to confirm and celebrate this moment, to put the seal of the world on it as the puff-sleeved Bishop was even at this instant putting on the seal of the Church.

'Godfrey, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her, in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?'

Forsaking all other. Yes. Yes. 'I will.'

And a moment or two later came Elizabeth's 'I will', sweetly and heart-dancingly with that touch of American in it. And stated as firmly and steadfastly as his own had been.

He listened and half-listened as the service continued. The Bishop's deep voice. The murmurous chanting of the psalm 'Blessed are all they that fear the Lord and walk in his ways', the Our Father, responses. And then he and Elizabeth sat in the low chairs that had been placed behind them and the Bishop preached.

Ought I not to pay full attention to this, to remember it, he asked himself. Are they not after all words of wisdom? But he felt he had no need of instruction. He knew the purpose of it all. It was the solemn admitting into the world of trust and order of two people. He was here with Elizabeth declaring himself at one with the whole great upward-striving process.

He had decided on it, and he had embraced it. Now it was done. He was fixed in a place in the world on top. And there he would stay.

The organ pealing again. A hymn sung with sudden vigour by the whole glittering congregation, all joined in an onrush of good feeling towards Elizabeth and himself.

And then the two of them were going through that vestry door arm in arm together to sign the register. And then it was signed, with her looking up at him for an instant to smile when she had written, rather round-handed and formally, the words 'Elizabeth Jane Mann'. And then they were making their way back through the church and out into the street where the snow had ceased to fall though the world was still as white as ever. And John the coachman, proud as a turkey, was lording it over his four glossy bays each wearing, as if, dammit, they knew just why, a white rosette in its harness. And the church bells were ringing for them, high and clear in the silence of the great snow-bound city.

And the wedding breakfast at Brook Street was every bit as tremendous an affair as Lady Augusta had declared it would be. The presents were all there on an immensely long sidetable strewn with rose-buds. There was the jewellery in its velvet-lined cases, there was the china in all its profusion of entrée dishes and gravy-boats, dining plates and dessert plates, there were the tea services and the coffee services, there were the decanters and the wine-glasses, there were the leatherbound volumes, of Scott, of Shakespeare, of

Longfellow, there were the pen-holder sets and the blotting-books and the platewarmers, there were the worked footstools and the ornately framed mirrors, the vases and the paperweights, there were three clocks, no fewer, each under a heavy glass dome, and there was the silver, the candelabras and the centre-pieces, the fruit dishes, the sweet dishes and the vegetable dishes, the salvers and the wine-coolers.

And they ate. They ate enormously. Of soups and entrees, of fowls, of game, of lobsters and oysters, of mayonnaises and salads, of jellies and creams and tipsy-cake. And there was champagne by the bottle and dozens of bottles. And toasts. And speeches. And the cutting of a huge wedding-cake, white almost as the snow outside.

And then came the moment for the bridal pair to leave for the honeymoon in Switzerland and John with the carriage at the door again, still turkeycock proud and noticeably redder in the face for the shadow celebrations that had begun in the servants' hall below. And the two of them got in, and white satin slippers were thrown and the horses went off at a rousing pace towards the Charing Cross Station and the Chatham and Dover Railway.

And it was over. They were married, married in church by a bishop, surrounded by a gathering of their relatives, friends and acquaintances representative of the great world of order of which they had been now confirmed for ever as honorary and life citizens.

It was as their train approached Dover, with only the Channel crossing and all its crowded bustle and possible unpleasantness in the way of sickness between them and the room in the hotel at Calais where they would spend the first night of their married life, that Godfrey began to concern himself actively about the precise events of that coming night.

Elizabeth was no ignorant girl, with nothing whatsoever told her before her marriage day of what took place between man and woman beyond perhaps one hasty maternal recommendation to endure some mysterious experience. She had undergone the selfsame instruction given to the future medical men of America. She must know in full detail the physiological events that took place. And yet, for all that she had seen plenty of the results of unfettered sexuality in her work and read in Blue Book and Report of the activities of prostitutes, she was surely as untaught as the most secluded clergyman's daughter in the essential of the matter. What could she know of the emotions that the act of intercourse roused up?

For a Captain Harnett or the like this would of course present no problem. For them women seemed to exist to provide objects, willing or unwilling, for their desires. And that was that. The object needed no thinking about, once secured. And there was no problem either for the sort of young girls he had seen down in Shadwell or Whitechapel, the sort that Lisa had told him she had been. The close proximity of a shared communal bed, the instinctive promptings of the night, and it would be done. Without ceremony.

But for Elizabeth, as with all those carefully brought-up young girls whose virginity had been not so much a thing prized as a thing so sacred it was not even to be spoken of, the beginning of sexual relations was an hour fraught with complexities. No doubt when it came down to the cruel fact for many of them, even for most of them, it would be a matter of un-understood pain and scrabbling humiliation under the heavy covers of a dark strange bed. And then in the nights that followed there would be a gradual realisation of what the whole intimate relationship was. And then there would be either a lucky coming to a *modus vivendi*, a shared giving and taking, or continuing eyes-shut misery.

And he himself wished for Elizabeth, he thought as the thudding train brought their private compartment moment by moment nearer Dover, surely an equal hand-in-hand partnership on that exploration into the luxuriant green and glossyleaved jungle whose outer border lay in the respectabilities of a room in the best hotel in Calais. And he had in some ways as little notion as she of where they would go in that jungle.

He knew too so little of his fellow-explorer. Her life history, yes. He had heard by now almost all of that. Her beliefs. Certainly he knew them. She had ignited him with their flame. But what of her life of the feelings? Some details he knew, that she disliked finding her fingers or her clothes dirty, for all that she was ruthlessly prepared to go into the dirtiest localities. He knew such minor things as that. But her deeper feelings? True, they had kissed. But always he had sensed on her part—and, to tell the truth, it had existed on his—a degree of formality. It was as if their kisses had been only a way of putting a special seal on some compact between them. They had been touchings of the lips. How far they were from those desireful plungings into each other that had marked his days with Lisa, his encounters with those others.

How would Elizabeth accept advances of that sort? Yet would he not, sooner or later, come to make them?

He pulled out his watch.

Elizabeth looked at him.

‘We shall be in Dover in a few minutes?’ she asked. ‘Yes. In a few minutes.’

There was still time to say those reassuring words. Perhaps only some dozen or two words were needed. Still time. If he spoke at once.

He said nothing.

‘Dearest?’

Elizabeth was leaning towards him with an evident mixture of hesitation and determination written on her face. It sent his heart actually thumping hard in the rib cage.

‘Yes, my dear one?’ he said.

‘Dear, this may be the last opportunity to say something that I feel must be said before—before tonight.’

Irresistibly drawn, he too leant forward across the noisedrumming privacy of the compartment.

‘Dearest,’ Elizabeth went on, looking into his eyes, ‘I want you to know something. My dear, you must already be aware that I realise that marriage is more than the uniting of two kindred spirits. I know that it is the uniting, too, of bodies. And, oh Godfrey, I must say it: I have my fears and doubts.’

He held out a hand across the gap between them. Elizabeth took it. Her grasp was cold.

‘My dear one,’ she said, in a voice he could only just catch in the steady thunder of the onward-moving train. ‘My dear, I hope that I have succeeded in tackling those fears as I would tackle any others. When some wretched girl in the rents comes to me and says she fears the birth of the illegitimate child she is carrying, I tell her as simply as I can what are the facts of the process of parturition. Godfrey, my dear one, I hope that I have been able to tell myself what are the facts of the whole relation there is to be between us tonight.’

He looked at her with as much admiration as he had felt for her at any time.

‘My darling,’ he said, ‘you know that it is perhaps more than facts that arise in this?’

‘Yes, I do know it. Do not think that I have reduced it to a mere series of mechanical events. I know those, and have nothing to fear there. It is the feelings that must accompany those events that have seemed to be a great void of darkness.’

In answer Godfrey could only take her cold hand with his other and hold it tightly.

‘But, my dear one,’ she said, ‘I have tried to cast a light into that black void. I hope that you will find it shone far enough when—when—tonight.’

The engine at the head of the train gave a long sobbing shriek as they began to slow down for the approach to Dover.

So when he and Elizabeth made love that night it went well. It went indeed far better than he had imagined possible. He had, for one thing, been a good deal worried by the difficulties he had expected over the breaking of her virginity. And there had proved to be none, though whether this was by chance or because she knew what was to happen and was prepared for it he did not ask. He saw afterwards that there was blood on the towel she had brought with her and placed on the bed, but at the time that barrier had been crossed as though it had not existed.

And the other barrier, the barrier in the mind that Elizabeth had spoken of as a black void before her, that too had gone down under the almost soldier-like resolution she brought to it. And so, both that night before they fell asleep and again when the early light woke them, he had found himself making love in a spirit and with an energy that he had not believed would have been possible between them for a very long time, if ever at all.

Yet, an instantly forced-down disloyal thought told him, the paths he and Elizabeth had begun to take together into the green jungle were not at all those he had taken with such sordid and practised companions as Kitty and Lisa. It was not that exploring them with her did not set his heart pounding, did not fill his mind with uncatchable bursts of light. But the paths were, without his much being able to define how, different paths.

Chapter Nineteen

Nor in the two weeks that followed in the heady snow-sparkling air of the Swiss Alps that had been Elizabeth's choice of place to spend these early married days did Godfrey succeed in explaining to himself just what ultimately was the difference between the long bedroom hours with Elizabeth and the lovemaking he had shared with other coarser women. And, in the months of home life that followed the Alpine weeks, he did not become much clearer.

There were, he quite soon saw, physical differences. He never came with Elizabeth, ardour-filled though their embraces were, to kiss her other than on the face and on the breasts. They never coupled except with himself above or beside her. But he had—he fought away the memories—made love with whores frequently in that manner and had yet experienced feelings very different, though perhaps not less intense, than those he now experienced with Elizabeth.

And, it was true, he never felt with Elizabeth any desire to play the tricks that with Lisa and others had added such multiplied delight to their encounters. Yet Elizabeth seemed more than happy, sometimes indeed said so with a quickly come-and-gone directness. She was right, too, he thought often. There was no question but that their love-making was joyous.

They had ventured together hand-in-hand into the green jungle. And there he had found, unexpectedly, sweet fruits for the picking. There, he had discovered to his surprise, it was possible to roam without encountering snakes sinuous and fork-tongued, pits dark and slimy.

So often and often they had roamed together. The Swiss days had proved—how little he had expected this—days devoted merely to bodily love. And, back in England, they were scarcely less ardent. Though Elizabeth had at once resumed her work and was often at Perkins Rents or the

other localities that came into her charge as early as nine o'clock in the morning, on many occasions they did not take the chilly plunge of getting up without having first come together in heart-thudding fast-breathing delight. And at night, though she often spent long hours working at some heavy batch of official Minutes or wrestling with a textbook of hygiene, when they did retire it was very seldom that they did not make love before they fell asleep between the smooth and lavender-scented lawn sheets that had been part of the Bosworth's wedding-gift.

They had a house in Red Lion Square, a house with a good large room at the back under a wide skylight looking north for Godfrey to work in. Very soon this home had taken on all the characteristics he had found so endearing at Gower Street. Though there was no landlady in starched white apron to create order and bright cleanliness. Elizabeth showed herself an excellent housekeeper and rapidly taught the cook and the two maids they had found. Each day went to pattern from the bringing in of his shaving-pot, invariably steaming hot, to the banking-down of the kitchen range at night and the bolting of the house doors.

Even young Billy, imported from Gillingham Place to clean the boots and the knives as well as keep his artist's brushes in order, lost under Elizabeth's tuition almost all his clumsiness and the doom-laden slummockiness of his bohemian days and became something of a paragon of punctuality and neatness.

So within a short time of their arrival from Switzerland they had been able to sit in the evenings in a room very much like that at Gower Street, except that at the back beyond the folding doors Elizabeth now had the library shelves the thought of which had once sent Miss Watkyn into such palpitations. And, as their first winter together went by, he would be ensconced on one side of the bright clear fire, in a chair much like Miss Watkyn's only somewhat

larger, and opposite would be Elizabeth with a book on her reading-stand. And the polish on the fireirons, the brass and the furniture would glint and glitter and the light from the gas-pendant would burn steady and clear and he would feel such a state of contentment that at times he thought he would burst.

And the order and the spotlessness round them there were reflected in the whole of the rest of the house. Floors were always sweet-smellingly polished, carpets were daily brushed and regularly beaten, furniture gleamed, things had their places and were kept in them, windows stood wide open in the mornings however cold the weather and let the fresh air pour in. And on Mondays, always, there was throughout the house starting from a surprisingly early hour the unmistakable smell of hot suds boiling in the copper and everything that should be washed was washed.

Those Monday wash-days were of so volcanic a nature that they disturbed the whole establishment from top to bottom, even penetrating in the form of that soapy odour into his holy of holies, the studio. And they came to mark for him, more surely than the calendar and the change in the seasons even, the progress of time. Week after week they arrived. There would be first the very early morning disturbance and the sound of hurried footsteps on the stairs. Then would come the soapy smell, slowly at first but soon totally pervasive. And at last there would be in the little garden below the studio the sight of blowing and billowing snowy-white sheets, only absent when fog swirled in the small enclosed space or rain beat solidly down. Week after week this long morning of disturbance marked the passing of seven more days of his married life.

And it was such a satisfying life. No wonder, he often thought, that the wash-day smell appeared to come round so soon. The weeks and the months flew for him, and it seemed no time at all before he was visiting Asprey's to buy

Elizabeth a small pendant on a neat gold chain to mark their first wedding anniversary.

And one evening a little later as they entered the drawing-room after dinner Elizabeth turned to him.

‘Do you know what day it is today, my darling?’ she said.

‘No,’ he answered momentarily puzzled.

‘It is just a year today since we spent our first evening together in this room.’

‘It is. It is.’

He felt a rush of happiness. The three hundred and sixty-five evenings that he had spent with her, most of them in this room, had been passed in a state of active and rosy contentment. It was an achievement. He could not go out to Asprey’s this minute and buy her something to mark it, but he did take her hand and press the palm of it with the ball of his ring-finger in a way that had become a signal between them.

‘Dearest,’ she half-reproved him as the maid came into the room with coffee.

Visits to Asprey’s were possible at this time because his work, despite a year of non-appearance at the Academy, was showing every sign of success. For the following year’s Academy he had painted another subject from Goethe, his ‘Hermann and Dorothea’, and into it he had found himself able to put with ease all the joy and simplicity of his feeling for Elizabeth. When it had been ready it had been arranged, through the good offices of Lady Augusta, that no less a person than the President of the Royal Academy should call at Red Lion Square one afternoon to see it.

The wrinkle-lined eyes had peered in the chill spring light. The white-polled head had moved slowly to and fro. Then the back had straightened, not without an arthritic grunt.

‘My dear fellow, you will one day surpass us all.’

And not very long after this there had come a note from Herr Pohlmann, very cautiously worded. There had followed

a formal visit from the polished and pomaded art-dealer. No reference whatever had been made to their previous encounter when the Venus Verticordia had been so abruptly withdrawn. Instead in the course of an hour during which the German had explained once more all about 'the truly magnificent opportunities awaiting an artist in these times, my dear sir' Godfrey had received a commission to paint a mere kitcat portrait of a Mr Joseph Murland, manufacturer, at a fee of three hundred guineas.

This was the first of a good many commissions from Herr Pohlmann, and his glossy carriage was frequently to be seen in Red Lion Square in the period that followed the very successful showing of the Hermann and Dorothea at that year's Academy. The engraving rights of that had been sold while the picture was still hanging and for a very substantial sum. And even more had been given for the rights of the two pictures he showed in the following year, 'The Woodland Wedding from As You Like It' and 'Kiss in the Ring', a contemporary subject that had come to him like a bolt from the blue one August Sunday when in the restless state he customarily got into between one picture and the next he had taken Elizabeth to the Crystal Palace. Dozens of working men and working girls had been playing that game there, the girls chasing the men in the hot sunshine and exacting their forfeits. The scene had suddenly caught his imagination, though he was never able to work out quite why, and he had at once abandoned several tentative subjects and had started work, painting the whole with quite unaccustomed speed.

The picture had received an extraordinary amount of critical praise, too, with *The Times*, the *Atheneum* and *Macmillan's* all uniting to acclaim it. Indeed, his work had been as successful with the critics as it had been financially. Except perhaps, as he confessed to Lady Augusta while visiting Brook Street one day, that he had yet to win the

approval of Mr Ruskin. But Lady Augusta, who since their marriage had taken a commanding interest in the art world, had a sharp answer to that.

‘My dear Godfrey, you cannot expect, painting your Woodland Weddings and your Hermann and Dorotheas, to be noticed by a person with the attitude to marriage of the former husband of Mrs Effie Millais.’

Godfrey, who had long before rejected as a possible explanation the eminent critic’s failure to consummate his union with the present wife of his distinguished colleague, merely offered a polite ‘I dare say you are right’.

‘Of course I am right,’ Lady Augusta countered. ‘And now I am reminded of something else that I have meant to speak to you about.’

‘I am all attention.’

‘Well, you do have the courtesy to listen to me, which is more than I can say for most young men nowadays.’

‘You frequently have something of great good sense to say, Aunt Augusta.’

‘I do. And what I have to say now is: why haven’t you and Elizabeth had a child yet?’

It took Godfrey a second or two to recover from this plain-spoken assault.

‘But such things cannot be brought about at whim,’ he managed to reply at last.

‘Nonsense. Or, since this is a matter to be taken seriously, what you say may very well be simply an evasion.’

They were alone, expecting Elizabeth from Perkins Rents. Lady Augusta did not lower her voice.

‘If a healthy young man and a healthy young woman lie in the same bed for a full two years night after night, then if the young woman is still not enceinte questions arise in one’s mind. Are you deliberately avoiding having a child?’

‘No, no, we are not.’

Lady Augusta gave him an unflinching look.

'There are no difficulties?' she barked. 'No stupid brutalities on your part that have driven her into panic? No schoolgirl innocence that you have failed to vanquish? No finding your pleasures where you think they're more easily got?'

'Nothing of any of that, I assure you,' Godfrey answered, mastering an increasing startledness.

'Then,' Lady Augusta retorted, 'if the pair of you have been mating two, three or four times a week, why has there been no child?'

'There has not been,' Godfrey replied.

'You've spoken of it together?'

'Yes. Yes, we have.'

'And?'

'Elizabeth says she would be very happy to have a child. And it would make me happy too if she were to have one.'

'Then what is it, my boy? Should you consult some medical man? They know precious little about such things of course—why, even Elizabeth is probably as knowledgeable as most of them—but if you wish it I could find you someone.'

'You are kind. But I think nevertheless ... Really, it is early days yet. Elizabeth is certainly not anxious. She has her work, after all.'

Lady Augusta straightened her somewhat podgy shoulders.

'And you know my opinion of that.'

Godfrey had thought that Lady Augusta's sudden extraordinarily frank outburst would be for him no more than a curious passing episode. It had been only when he called to mind that she was the daughter of a duke and that at that level of society in the time of her youth there had always been a healthy contempt for convention that he

could at all account for it all. But what she had said did not fade from his thoughts. Instead he found himself questioning more and more Elizabeth's continuing childlessness. It was not that he himself passionately wanted a son and heir. He was not Sir Charles with an estate to hand on. Indeed, he felt that if anything his pictures were his children.

Yet, as each month came and went and Elizabeth said nothing, uneasiness grew within him. He felt with ever increasing acuteness that without this crowning proof their marriage was somehow not complete.

Eventually, in accordance with the principles he had imbibed from Elizabeth herself, one evening he put the matter frankly to her.

She looked across at him, the firelight making a play of shadows and dark orangey lights across her full grave face.

'Well, yes, my dearest,' she said, 'as you know I have expected to find myself pregnant long before this.'

'Yes, yes. But, tell me, don't you share this—this notion of mine that without a child our marriage is not quite complete?'

She considered a little, solemn in the firelight.

'No,' she said at last. 'In fairness, I must admit that the idea had not crossed my mind.'

She leant earnestly forward then, the glow of the fire catching her full bosom.

'And surely it is only a notion,' she said. 'Surely it is only fancy. You must try to see that. Our marriage is complete. You know it is.'

'I know that I love you, Elizabeth. I love you now more even than I did in those days in Switzerland, the Switzerland that seems so long ago.'

She sat still in her chair, leaning intently towards him, as if in the shadowy light she wished to penetrate to his inmost being.

‘Yes, you love me, I know,’ she said. ‘And yet there is a “but”. You say nothing, Godfrey dearest, yet I hear that “but”.’

‘Yes,’ he admitted. ‘There is a “but”. This notion about a child has become too much embedded in my mind to be chased out at a word.’

Elizabeth rose from her chair, crossed in front of the fire’s strong and flickering glow and came and sat on the floor beside him, her arms resting on his knee, her face looking up at him.

‘Let us go into this together, dearest,’ she said. ‘Let us try to cast a full light on it, to send these shadows scattering.’

Godfrey sighed.

‘To me they are doubts more substantial than shadows.’

‘No. They must not be. They need not be. A union does not need such a chance tangible proof of success to be all that it should be. You must know that.’

Her gaze was steady on him, impassioned.

‘My dearest,’ she said, ‘I know that from time to time one sees a couple, childless perhaps but giving every sign that all is well between them, one even catches glimpses of behaviour that would seem to indicate it completely, and then suddenly there is a notorious Divorce Court case. But, my dear, they are not us. We know that we are united.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, we know it. Yes, my dear, these must be fancies and I will not give them rein.’

Yet neither what she had said nor what he had sworn had lifted the heaviness he felt. A long silence fell by the light of the fire.

Elizabeth broke it. She got to her feet with a swishing rustle of her long skirt.

‘It’s dark,’ she said. ‘I will ring for Jane to light the gas.’

‘Yes. Yes.’

They waited, in a silence that was somewhat constrained, for the bell to be answered, for Jane, neat in her print dress and white apron, to ignite a taper from the coals, to reach up to the gas-mantle inside its opalescent shade, to adjust the chains of the tap till a white steady light was illuminating the whole room, to bob a curtsey, to depart.

‘My dearest,’ Elizabeth said, as the door softly closed, ‘I can see now that you are still not happy. Let us look at it again in a rational way.’

‘Of course.’

‘Medical science does not know as much as it should about the failure of conception,’ she said. ‘The subject, perhaps because it more concerns women than men, has been neglected. But at least example teaches us that quite often a woman will not conceive for a long while, for years even, and then, for some reason we have no inkling of, she does. There may be some inner event that we have not understood. Or indeed it may well be simply the result of some psychological change.’

‘Some psychological change?’ Godfrey said. ‘Yes. Yes. I suppose so.’

‘And doesn’t this knowledge remove the burden, your irrational burden?’

‘Yes. No. My dear, I hardly know.’

‘But, dear one,’ Elizabeth said with gentleness, ‘don’t you see? If what I have told you is true, and as far as medical science can go it is true, then you must disabuse yourself of this idea.’

‘Yes,’ Godfrey said. ‘I must.’

Chapter Twenty

He did make conscientious efforts to expel from his mind this notion that the advent of a child was a necessary seal on his marriage to Elizabeth, especially after medical examination had eliminated any physical reason. But, do what he might, the idea obstinately lodged with him. Their continuing childlessness seemed positively to taunt him. He even found himself once particularly singled out, so it seemed to him, by Arthur Balneal, simply to be told by that round-spectacled individual that he was now the father of no fewer children than nine.

Was the fellow deliberately mocking him?

When he went, as he sometimes did, to meet Elizabeth at one of the enclaves cared for by the Society for the Promotion of Sanitary Visiting, he failed entirely to take note of the things that Elizabeth would later ask him to comment on, the knife-edge line of demarcation between a scrubbed passageway and the dirt-encrusted boards of a room beyond where tenants had not yet learnt the lesson, a new clean water-butt or slate cistern, a roof no longer patched with such objects as tea-trays discarded by higher reaches of society. Instead he saw only babies, wretched puling babies in the worst quarters with fingers sometimes gnawed by rats, yet nevertheless babies. Even dead infants frequently enough, laid in a splintery box awaiting the necessary pawning of articles of almost no value before burial could take place. But, for all their pitifulness, tangible signs that procreation had taken place.

At home, under the plane trees of Red Lion Square, it was babies in the new perambulators being wheeled precariously about by their nursemaids. And through the windows of almost every house he passed, it sometimes seemed, he was bound to observe the tall white peak of the curtains over a well-guarded crib. Even when he paid one of

his regular visits to his colourman it was not the shopman himself who greeted him, but his wife explaining that he had 'just stepped out for a moment' and nursing the while at an enormous bosom a great sprawling lusty infant of some fifteen or eighteen months.

He had decided as soon as he had realised that Elizabeth's firm exposition of the medical facts was not going to drive the idea from his head that he would say no more to her about it. It was the first time he had made up his mind to deceive her in anything since the beginning of their marriage, and the decision burdened him. Until now he had felt free to say to her whatever came into his head. It was one of the wonderful charms of being married to her, to have a confidante to whom he could entrust his most ambitious dreams equally with the most absurd fancies that crossed his mind or even little unrepeatable malicious comments on their acquaintance.

But, once having put one topic beyond the magic circle, he began to feel the spell was broken. If one subject was omitted from their sessions of free-spoken thoughts, everything else had to be held up to the test before being introduced. No longer was Arthur Balneal and his uncheckable fecundity matter for mutual joking.

But his preoccupation was not to go for ever unmentioned between them.

It was on an evening at the very end of November, an evening turned to darkest night by the fog which had clung to the streets all day, yellow and seeping. Abruptly and quite unexpectedly then Elizabeth chose to refer to it.

They were seated snugly in the drawing-room. The thick red curtains were carefully drawn. The gaslight's calm radiance had displaced every foggy particle that might have penetrated the windows. Behind Godfrey's chair stood the heavy screen that came out only when a particularly unpleasant day sent tiny sneaking currents of cold air in

through the very least joins in the window-frames. The fire was glowing with warm cheerfulness.

And in the midst of a long contented silence Elizabeth spoke.

‘Dearest, that notion of yours, it worries you still?’

He did not need to ask what she meant, though he hesitated an instant wondering whether to pretend he had not understood. But subterfuges of that sort were not possible between them.

‘Yes,’ he replied, almost immediately. ‘To be entirely frank, I still feel as I did when we last spoke of it.’

‘But, my darling, that was almost two months ago.’

He glanced away.

‘Yes. Yes, I suppose it was.’

‘And you have been thinking of it all that time?’ Elizabeth was looking steadily across at him. Her lucid grey gaze was hard to bear.

‘—I suppose I may have been.’

‘Yet you said nothing?’

‘What was there to say? What on earth was there to say?’

‘Simply that you were thinking of this, my darling. I believed that you told me everything that came into your mind.’

‘Well, in this instance there was something that I did not.’

‘My dear. But you should, you must.’

Suddenly he let his pent anger go.

‘I must, must I? Cannot a man think a single thought of his own without being compelled to confess to it? As if he were some Romanist?’

‘Was it a thought then that had to be “confessed”?’

‘No, it was not. Or, if it was, it was only so because the last time the subject was discussed between us you made an unholy to-do about it.’

'A to-do? My dear, we discussed it thoroughly because it merited thorough discussion. You told me, of your own accord, that this idea was worrying you. And I tried, with you, to go into it on a simple scientific basis and show that it did not stand up to examination. I had thought that that was the end of it.'

'Well, it was not.'

'I see that it wasn't. But, my dear one, it ought to have been. Dearest, we must look at it again. We must ask together why. Why this idea has come to mean so much to you.'

'I neither know nor care.'

For a moment or two Elizabeth sat stock-still in stunned silence. He had not used such a tone to her once in all the time they had known each other.

But at the end of that small time-weighty pause she spoke.

'No, let us talk together calmly and clearly. We must not let such a—such a chimera as this come between us.'

'Very well,' he answered, still somewhat sullen.

'I think I see now where I—where we went astray before. It was not enough simply to show that the idea is based on untenable grounds: we ought to have asked why it was of such apparent importance to you.'

Godfrey made no reply. The sound of a cab going by in the fog outside, the horse's hooves clapping out at a cautious walk, echoed strangely and heavily.

'Godfrey? Dearest?'

He sighed.

'Yes, I suppose we ought to ask why that has been so.'

'Then why? Why, my darling? Why should you be so obsessed by this notion of a child being necessary as a sort of mark of approbation for our marriage?'

'Obsessed? Really now, that is going too far.'

‘Is it, my dear? Truly?’

Her grey eyes were looking at him unbendingly.

‘Well, no,’ he admitted at last. ‘No, perhaps “obsessed” is in a way the word.’

‘Then we must try to find out what it is that makes you feel this is so important. Dearest, however deep we have to cut.’

‘But I do not know. I tell you, Elizabeth, I do not know. The thought is there. There. And that is all to be said about it.’

‘No, my dearest. That I cannot believe. There must be a reason why such an irrational idea means so much to you. There must be a reason lying in you somewhere. And, if only we bring a strong enough light to bear, then surely, surely, we will see it.’

Godfrey raised his hands from the arms of his chair in a gesture of weary despair.

He saw that they had stumbled quite suddenly on to the very edge of a gaping trap. It was the core of Elizabeth’s creed that there was nothing in life that could not eventually be brought to the light of knowledge, though there might be things that as yet human understanding did not know how to reach to. Her belief he himself had come to accept wholeheartedly. And now abruptly it no longer seemed sufficient. He felt that whatever it was deep in him that had caused to flower in his mind the idea of their marriage being incomplete without the proof of a child did not intend to yield to any surgeon’s knife. And Elizabeth was all surgeon, cutting and exposing. Was this a division of the ways for them then? A long growing apart to come?

‘My dear, my dearest one,’ he said, ‘I think we had better not speak of this any more, not at least for tonight.’

‘No,’ Elizabeth answered, as he had feared she might. ‘No, we have left it too long already. In the dark it will fester and spread. We must find what it is that has caused this aberration in you.’

‘My dearest. No.’

‘Yes, Godfrey. I say yes.’

‘No.’

It had taken on in an instant the absurd note of a children’s quarrel. But children’s quarrels, though they may not last long, are more bitter and more inflexible than those of grown men.

Godfrey stood up, his face stiff with coldness.

‘I am sorry, Elizabeth,’ he said. ‘But I am not going to discuss this any further.’

‘Godfrey, we must and we shall.’

‘We shall not.’

‘Godfrey, tell me. Tell me now: what was it that put this idea into your mind? When did it first come? What led to it? Godfrey, answer.’

‘No, Elizabeth.’

‘What led to it? What?’

‘No.’

He turned vehemently on his heel and walked out of the chill-protected room. In the hall it felt noticeably colder and the fanlight above the front door was thickly misted with the dense fog beyond. He snatched an old wideawake from its place on the hatstand above the rack for hanging brushes—the clothes brushes, the hat brush, the mud brush—and jammed it on to his head. He jerked his heavy coat from its appointed hook, jabbed and shoved his arms into the arm-holes and, disdaining the neatly ranged gloves in the glove-box, he heaved open the door and flung himself out into the night.

He was unable even to see across the street. The gaslamp some twenty yards down was no more than a dim patch of yellow light in the thick darkness. But he was determined to get as far as he could from the house before Elizabeth decided to come and reason with him and he set off

striding along the wet pavement forcing himself to make each pace fully long though every sensible instinct urged caution.

By the time he had reached the lamp-post, coming upon it in a single instant, a glossy wet streak in the enveloping black, he knew that he was already beyond pursuit. He would hardly hear now if Elizabeth opened the door and called or perhaps sent Billy out after him. But he continued to walk as fast as he could force himself to, taking pleasure in thrusting into the dense cold clinging wet stuff all around him.

Soon he ceased to know at all where he was, and the thought of being cut off from that everyday piece of knowledge added to the curious feeling of comfort that was growing in him with every forward pace he took.

He walked on and on, sometimes following the line of a kerbstone, just visible glistening at his feet, sometimes deliberately stepping off into the roadway as into an unknown sea.

He imagined he was in little danger of being run down. Whatever vehicles had to be out on a night like this were bound to be going at no more than a walking-pace. Indeed, once he followed for what he guessed must be a mile at least an old four-wheeler that was creeping along with some huddled great-coated figure inside and the driver in front no more than an occasionally dimly heard curse or groan. Even the light from its lamps was invisible to him.

At times he met other ghost figures passing near him, not seeing him at all but making their way through the impenetrable thickness, coughing and with handkerchiefs held to their faces, lonely as if they were crossing a range of far hills. And only once in perhaps two hours' walking did he abruptly realise where he was.

He found his way suddenly blocked by tall iron railings. At first he thought it must be some gate, into a churchyard

perhaps. But then, moving along, he found the railing continued to stretch away beside him and he came to the conclusion that he must be somewhere at the edge of the Park. Perhaps even he was within a few yards of the spot where more than three years before he had waited for much of a long summer afternoon to see the Bosworth carriage and the young American lady doctor who had written to him so impulsively to tell him her feelings about his picture 'Torquato Tasso Leaving the City of Ferrara'.

He smiled in the enveloping soot-reeking dark and felt the moisture on his face gather into heavy drops. Hard to imagine that sunny scene now. Hard to see those brilliant open carriages, those high-stepping horses and all the beau monde that had paraded there so confidently, the twirling of parasols, the tall silk hats bent in respectful attention.

And the thought of the Park and its wide spaces gave him a sudden determination. He could not enter here but he could walk in Green Park on the other side of Piccadilly which was not shut off. If he followed the line of these railings, with any luck he could guide himself there.

He set off, trailing his bare fingers along the cold uprights of the railings till he found that he had got to Hyde Park Corner. And there he plunged off hopefully at what he guessed was the right line, blinking his smarting eyes in his efforts to see.

Though he discerned nothing, before long he found the hard pavements and the cobbled roadways under his feet yielding to soft grass and the occasional looming shape of a massive tree and he felt confident that he had succeeded in hitting on Green Park. He progressed in an entire silence now, going anywhere and totally content to have put himself into such a limbo.

Would that it could last for ever. Would that the slow choking folds of fog would never blow at last away. Would that daylight would never come. Then he would never have

to face the straight lines, the rigid pattern of actions-and-consequences that daylight life required. Then he would never have painfully to dredge up those answers to Elizabeth's probing persistent questions, answers that he half-guessed could never be brought to light. Then he would never have to resolve the dilemma he had found himself in, the choice between the philosophy she had taught him, that blessed belief that at the last light would show all, and admitting to himself that the happy oneness between them must be coming to an end.

But already he felt in his face the stirrings of a tiny steady wind. The softly swirling irresponsible fog was beginning to be swept away.

Soon it was possible to make out around him the shapes of the tall trees. And then it was borne in on him that he was not the only person wandering there. Pillars of thicker darkness, which he had at first taken for bushes or piles of hurdles, became clearly discernible as the vague outlines of human beings. And there were women as well as men, meeting and parting or meeting and slowly walking off together.

'Hello, dear, looking for a feel, are yer?'

It was the voice of a woman, coarse and harsh. And suddenly she loomed out in front of him from the shadow of the thick trunk of a tree, a ghost-figure in the still fog-scented night.

'What? What? What did you say?'

She came a couple of steps nearer. It was too dark to make out anything of her features or the details of her dress. But he could see a pale blur of a face looking up at his and the outline of a spreading skirt and what looked like a shawl round the head.

In the wet darkness she gave a chuckle now, plainly intended to reassure.

‘Like a nice feel, dear?’ she repeated. ‘Come on, there’s no one near. Only cost you a bob.’

But he had well understood what she was asking from the first. Yet he stood beside her unmoving, paralysed. Thoughts tumbled through his head. He ought to repudiate the disgusting creature at once. But he felt, strong as the reek of soot-laden fog had been in his nostrils, a tug of attraction. It was the appeal, he knew, not so much of the drab in front of him now as of all that she embodied, the old thrilling world that he thought he had left behind him for ever. It was, powerful, rank, sudden, almost irresistible, the call of the underside.

And the underside was now only one foot away. Only the merest easily breakable bubble-skin separated him once more from that other world.

Only the distance between his hand, held rigidly to his side at this moment, and what it was this creature had offered him under her skirt.

‘Come on.’

She stooped a little suddenly and started to gather up that skirt. He saw below him the two whitish tapering columns of her unstockinged legs. Going up into the blackness above.

And he reached forward.

What was he doing? Why was he doing it? He did not want to. And yet, as he felt his fingers penetrating the abundant clogged hair, he did want. He wanted passionately.

It was childish. Absurd. And yet ... It was not even vigorously satisfying, although his prying fingers were now causing him to experience more than a little genital excitement. Yet he wanted this. He wanted it more, he noted with dismay, than the love-making he joined in two or three times a week in his own lawn-sheeted bed though he had felt that as rapture and delight.

Then his fingers encountered a sticky wetness that for a moment mystified him, then briefly horrified him, but almost at once flooded him with an overpowering fascination.

‘You’re not clean,’ he said.

“Course I ain’t. I just been stroked.’

‘You have?’

But he knew that she had. The realisation that some unknown man had spent there, and not long before, had been what had sent the blood racing in him.

“Course I been stroked. An’ may be yer’d like to do it too? Yer can fer a bob or two more.’

Yes, this was what he wanted, needed, must and would have. This world. The underside.

Chapter Twenty-One

Yet Godfrey, for all that he felt committed once again to the rich and fertile dark side of life, found the constraints he had re-learned in the time he had lived solely in the aspiring world were still strong. Fears that he had once overcome had reasserted themselves. Even in the first beating flush of his excitement at contact with the fog-emerging creature who had accosted him he recognised that prudence was still too engrained in him to allow him to pursue the encounter to the end which the drab had proposed.

Instead, while his hand was yet prying and feeling and keeping him cord-attached to the underside, he began engaging the night-creature in alienating conversation.

‘Is it often that you come here?’ he asked. ‘What are you doing here on a night like this?’

‘Why, tonight’s as good as any other. You’re glad enough I’m ‘ere, ain’t yer?’

‘Yes, I suppose I am.’

The voice enacted the rôle of gentleman, cool and detached. The groping fingers enacted another rôle, petty and prying and passionate.

‘Then give us yer shilling. Give us more. I’m a poor woman.’

Godfrey withdrew his hand with sharp abruptness. He found, quickly as he could, a few silver coins and thrust them towards the creature in front of him. She took them scrabbly and he saw her holding them up, finding out how much she had got.

‘But why here?’ he asked, wanting to rush away, yet still unable to go. ‘Surely even on a night like this you’d do better to be underneath a streetlamp?’

A coarse laugh greeted this.

‘Lor, you ain’t seen me, that’s certain. Ain’t seen me face.’

‘Well, no, I suppose I have not. Why?’

“Cos it ain’t much of a face, and that’s a fac’. Lost me nose I did. Got it cut away in an accident when I was a kitchenmaid a good many year ago now. ‘Course I couldn’t get no work arter that.’

Godfrey, in the still clinging darkness, imagined the face that would be leering up into his. He imagined too the body beneath it, scrawny, aged and dirty. The body with which his hand had until a moment before been in the most intimate contact. And joy abruptly flooded his veins again.

The woman he had encountered at a coffee-stall one night after leaving Lisa. That haggish disgusting creature. She had boasted that there were men who preferred her to all the charms of the most doll-like whores to be got. Now he understood.

Now he understood why there were people who went to the parks at night. He had heard Captain Harnett say at the club once that there were on some evenings as many as a thousand men to be found on the hunt here in Green Park and in Hyde Park before the gates were shut. He had thought then it could not be possible. He had thought, in his days of innocence, that only the merest handful of the most depraved could want to pursue the disgusting practices Harnett had cheerfully enumerated. But now he knew.

And the joy sang.

Then, in a moment, it seeped totally away.

What was he doing? He, Godfrey Mann, the painter? The aspirer, the guide?

Sickened with himself, he turned and broke into a lurching run in the darkness. More than once he blundered into trees.

And then he fell full-length over a row of low hurdles and sent a flock of sheep galloping and baaing wildly into the night. He lay where he was wiping his hand on the fog-wetted grass till he had torn the tough blades away and was

scraping at the earth below, forcing it cleansingly under his fingernails.

But, though he had tracked his way back home then, he knew that having tasted the rank and gloating waters once more he could now go back to them again as easily as a swimmer slipping into his proper element. His wedding in the snow no longer seemed the crowning of the story: its import surely was as transient as that snow and as insubstantially pretty.

So he found without surprise next day that his mind was continually assailed by the old underside life. And he both ceased making love with Elizabeth and told her that his night's walking had disabused him of his notion about a child. A plain lie. Was not a child a true sign of something missing in her for him? The underside richness?

Outwardly he went on in his customary even-tempered course. A little more than a week, nine days exactly, was to go by from the moment when he had realised that his life might not after all be a high and endlessly level plateau stretching to the end of his allotted span but that he might well have been simply in a pausing place on a journey that would take him at last to depths deeper than any he had yet imagined. But during those days, while he hung like a metal cylinder on a fine thread equally drawn between two strong magnets, there occurred three or four instances when, had things been as they had been before, he and Elizabeth would have joined in light-flashing triumph-crowned love-making. And each time he avoided it.

It was not difficult. There had been occasions enough in their married life when Elizabeth had said to him that she had her courses or simply that she was very tired or had a headache. And there had been occasions too when he had made his excuses to her. So a murmured apology once, and at another time an unusually quick turning of the back to

sleep and at a third failure to understand the meaning of a half-caress had made certain that nothing took place.

And that was what he wanted. He could not have endured, his mind constantly rearing up with images and remembrances of the underside, to enact with Elizabeth what would seem to be even the faintest parody of events there. And, strongly as he felt this, he also contrived, with a flexibility of mind that gave him wry amusement, to feel exactly the opposite: that it would be betraying Elizabeth and the high pure sweet life he had led with her, and could lead still, to pretend to be loving her with all his being—what were those words in the Marriage Service? ‘With my body I thee worship?’—while his mind was filled with thoughts, and even with explicit visions, of other women in that other world.

He told himself at that time that if his state of suspension simply continued long enough it was most likely that he would gradually fall back fully into the life that to all appearances he was leading and that then he might well stay there for ever still. Mere habit would do it. And then he would be able once more to cleave whole-heartedly to Elizabeth and to her ideals of, as he had heard her quote from the motto of her medical college in America, ‘clean air, clean water, pure food, temperance and chastity’, to his own particular ideals of art pursued for the illumination of his fellow beings and to the ideal of the great rolling advance of Society itself.

But the state of suspension did not continue. On the ninth day the cylinder between the magnets swung suddenly and decisively.

It was very little that tipped the balance, the merest scrap of chance. He was going to spend the day in the Reading Room of the British Museum. He had been for some time in that state of somewhat restless searching about between pictures which he generally seemed to have to suffer. In the

summer he had been painting 'The Nuptials of Theseus and Hippolyta' from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It had been finished for nearly a month and he had been anxious to settle definitely on another subject with a view to having two pictures to enter in next year's Academy. The fairy world element of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had turned his mind to the treatment of the supernatural by Goethe, in the witches' sabbath on the Brocken in *Faust*. It was a subject he both wanted and did not want to tackle. It had seemed a departure from the emotional field he had found so congenial and successful since he had been married and yet, for what reason he could not say, he felt strongly attracted to it. As part of the process of sorting himself out he had thought of reading other authors' descriptions of those legendary rites in the Harz Mountains. And so he was on his way to the British Museum.

It so happened that just as the short walk from Red Lion Square took him past a small bookseller's shop a sudden heavy shower of rain came on. He had no umbrella and decided to take shelter, and there among the volumes he idly turned over was the translation of Juvenal in Bohn's Classical Library. Straightaway his eye fell on the words 'She then took her stand with naked breasts and gilded nipples'. It was, he saw, the poet's description in the 'Satire on Women' of the misdeeds of the Empress Messalina.

And in an instant he connected her, as if a long leaping electric spark had zig-zagged across the gap of centuries, with Lisa. There was no precise reason why. In all his sexual dealings with Lisa she had never painted her nipples, though she might have done. But the words of the old Roman satirist, as translated with exact and plodding faithfulness by of all people an English clergyman some seventeen hundred years later, made him see instantaneously what there was of Lisa in the young lust-

dominated empress, what there was of Messalina in the nineteenth-century harlot.

He put down the book, closing it carefully, left the shop and turned unhesitatingly in the opposite direction from the Museum.

He must immerse himself once more in Messalina's, in Lisa's world.

He strode along the broad pavements of this solemnly respectable area, washed scouredly clean by the shower, heading unfalteringly for the filth, the broken cobbles, the slimy lanes of St Giles. It ought to have been, he knew, to wherever Lisa herself might be. But Lisa was no longer in the world he sought. She had been removed from it. Of this he felt totally sure. It had truly been her he had seen at the Derby, and the man beside her, Joey, had beyond doubt been married to her. How that could have come about he could not conceive. Why she had deserted the world of which she had seemed the writhing and thrusting embodiment he could not think. She had taught him its ways. She had first enunciated for him its credo. But she had left it, had for some unguessable reason or none moved up into the world of laws.

She was lost to him, removed from the world he wanted now burningly to re-enter. But she had left him an inheritance. She had left him—he saw it ice-clearly in a moment—Mulatto Mary. Mulatto Mary, different as could be in physical characteristics from Lisa herself, thin-bodied, white-skinned, angular, yet nevertheless her heir. She was indeed, he saw now, an heiress richer than her benefactor. She held for him a deeper promise than Lisa had done, for all that he and she had contrived together, for all that Lisa had instructed him in.

For a moment a turbulent stream of vehicles in the road he had to cross halted him. Then he flung himself into the heaving tussling hoof-resounding press, the carriages and

the carts, the cabs and the groaning waggons, the placarded buses and the dashing hansoms temporarily foiled by the hurly-burly, and plunged across.

St Giles lay ahead. And he did not doubt that there Mulatto Mary would be, though all but three years had passed since he had seen her there and unaccountably declined the carelessly prodigal offers she had made to him.

And then he was there, in St Giles again, its narrow crowded streets close about him with the amazingly familiar reek of its close-packed denizens. The sharp smell of fustian clothing wetted by the rain, the strong odour of unwashed sweaty bodies, the intermittent sharp tang from gin-wrecked breath. He walked as if in a dream, sure beyond doubt that the object of his quest would be where he expected, a child's treasure laid for safe-keeping in some nook among the thickened roots of an ancient tree.

Unhesitatingly he picked out his way, pushing through the streets of lean and hungry shops, finding the yet narrower lanes, stepping over the mounds of decaying rubbish, kicking aside the snarling belly-to-ground dogs and scarcely doing more to avoid the crawling proliferating mass of puppy humans. Yet these last checked him a little. Babies, infants, snotty-faced and dirty-legged, would he soon be rid of their taunt?

Then at last came the familiar end-blocked alley. The drably grey clothes hanging to dry across it from house to house might have been the very same patched and ragged garments he had seen three years before. The litter of cabbage-leaves on the puddles of its unpaved surface might have been there untouched since he had taken Kitty somewhere among them. Here was the very place indeed that had risen up to him more than once in dreams in his clean-sheeted plump-pillowed marital bed.

He hurried along its length, the whiffs of stale urine stronger with every step. Then he was at the familiar

doorway of the narrow-fronted house at the end, its worn-down step almost miraculously recalling to his mind its exact hollowed-out shape and grittily grey colour.

Without an instant's pause for consideration, he pushed at the time-blackened door. It swung open, as it always had. And there was the dark flight of steps that led to the big basement kitchen.

He felt his way down, unable to hurry because of the darkness but unworried with his quest so nearly over. And the low-ceilinged kitchen was just as he had remembered it, with the same sharp smell of bacon frizzling at the same sullen coke fire, with the big battered table just as it had been and round it half a dozen slouching figures who were probably not at all the people he had met three years before but who, tattered and dark-faced, might well be.

He looked across without hesitation towards the corner where Mulatto Mary had been accustomed to sit. Even in the gloom he would catch the white glint of the eyes in that broad bronze face, the whiter glint of her teeth as she grinned.

And she was not there. No one was there.

'Mary,' he blurted out to the dim figures looking warily up at him. 'Mulatto Mary, the woman they called Mulatto Mary, where is she?'

'Yer wanting Mulatto Mary?' a woman's voice responded from the far end of the big table.

Standing just inside the room and peering through the smoky gloom, he thought he recognised the speaker. Surely she was one of the whores he had known, the one with the billhook of a face? As his eyes grew moment by moment more accustomed to the half-darkness he recognised more of her broken and battered features.

'It's Jessie, isn't it?' he asked.

'Yer know me then?'

'I used to come here often, some three years ago.'

‘Yeh. Got yer now. Kitty. You were one o’ Kitty’s.’

‘Yes, I was one of Kitty’s. But it’s Mary I’m looking for now, Mulatto Mary.’

‘She’s ’ere sometimes,’ Jessie conceded. ‘On and off. But I ain’t seen ’er fer weeks now.’

He felt immensely chagrined. She ought to be here: he had wanted her here. But the puppet-master does not always act at the behest of the puppets.

‘But do you know where she might be?’ he said. ‘Where she might be at all?’

For a little he thought the billhook-faced whore was going to make no reply. But eventually she spoke again.

‘The fly-paper man,’ she said. ‘He’d know where she is. Runs ’er, ’e does. When she lets anyone run ’er, that is.’

‘The fly-paper man. I remember him. He brought me here first. But is he to be found here still?’

‘Aye,’ replied Jessie morosely. ‘E’s round about right enough. Lives ’ere still, ’e do. But ain’t yer seen ’im up West?’

‘No. No, I don’t think so.’

But had he? Had he, in a cab, hurrying somewhere, glimpsed that curious figure with the tower of broad sticky papers wound round his tall hat? Had he seen him for a few seconds, and had the man made no impact on his mind? It was possible. In cab or carriage he had belonged totally to the world of cabs, carriages, appointments and purposefulness. That figure from the other world which he had thought had fallen away from him entirely might well have made no impression at all.

‘Yeh,’ said Jessie. ‘Try the fly-paper man, if yer must ’ave Mary. Though if it’s no more nor a roll on a floor yer looking fer, I’ll take a quid off of yer quick as any.’

He wondered whether he ought not to accept the offer. Would it not be a sign of what world he was in? But the thought of Mulatto Mary, of her wide and deep bosom, of

her spreading generous hips, her broad bronze features, at once drove out the thought. It was her he wanted. She whom he had refused before: she it must be now.

‘The old man?’ he said. ‘When could I see him? Do you know?’

‘Why, ‘e’s ‘ere often enough dinner time,’ Jessie said, unconcerned at not having her offer taken up. ‘Yer’d not ‘ave ter wait above an hour, may be less. Or, like as not, yer’d meet ‘im by the way now.’

‘Then I’ll go,’ Godfrey said.

He proffered Jessie a shilling and found it snatched from his hand under the mute sharp gazes of the other inhabitants of the cellar kitchen.

Then he made his way back to the meeting place of the Seven Dials, certain that if the fly-paper man was coming from the West End he could intercept him there. He stood leaning against a street post waiting, watching the busy life all round, the people going in and out of the seven big gin-palaces already doing a brisk trade, the sharp-faced thieves, the play-acting beggars, the song patterers, the bird-fanciers with their singing charges in cages by their sides.

But he did not have long to wait. Suddenly, on the far side of a knot of boys and youths gathered round a raucous song-sheet seller bawling out a ballad about ‘The Jack Tars of Old England’, he saw that sticky fly-paper decorated hat.

In half a minute he was confronting the old long-locked long-bearded man, the hat with its swathes of fly-stuck papers nodding over him.

‘Good morning. I believe you might tell me where I can find a person going by the name of Mulatto Mary.’

He had spoken stiffly enough, seeing the old man much as he might see any of the hundred and one other menials who touched on the pattern of his daily life, the cabbies, the club servants, the clerks perched on their stools in outer

offices, the match-sellers, the shoeblacks, the crossing-sweepers. But he received an answer he did not expect.

There was no cadging assumption of the utmost willingness to oblige. Instead the gaunt-faced grimy-eyed old man looked him slowly up and down and said not a word.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was not until he had fully absorbed the look of stony indifference which was all the answer the fly-paper man returned to his lofty inquiry for the whereabouts of Mulatto Mary that he recalled what he should have remembered before, that curious gathering-up of authority which had come to the old man the last time they had entered the no-man's-land of St Giles together three years before. Out in the world of cabs and carriages this fellow in his long flapping grease-thick old coat might be of no more account than the meanest cringing beggar: in this other world he was a figure of power.

'I—I was told you might be able to help me,' he stammered at last in face of the old man's silence. 'If you could I'd be grateful, most grateful.'

'You've taken a letch fer Mulatter Mary.'

It was not a question. It was a statement. For a moment he resented it. But the running desire that occupied every corner of his mind at once swept over and obliterated these last traces of the old regime.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, I want her. Can you tell me where I can find her? Please.'

He was begging.

The old man looked at him from glaring deep-sunken eyes.

'They say,' he pronounced at last, 'there's a nobleman what took 'er up. Nobleman wiv a fancy c'lection o' beauties, black, white and yeller. Kep' a place up over St John's Wood. They say.'

'There? She is there?'

'Yer'd be a fool ter b'lieve all yer hears,' the fly-paper man replied after a little.

Godfrey submitted his will to this piece of enigmatic contempt.

‘Then where is she to be found?’ he asked. ‘Where, please?’

‘Yer’d better come an’ ask me that in a day or two,’ the fly-paper man answered. ‘I can’t be looking arter the likes o’ you whenever yer chooses ter ask. Come in a day or two.’

The king in his territory was not to be put to trouble. The old man stalked away, his hat with its toppling swathe of broad sticky papers visible above the surrounding heads for minutes afterwards.

Godfrey stood there, feeling emotions and counter-emotions swirl and plunge within him. Mary, he had to have her. Should he run after that insolent fellow, shake the truth out of him? Was she really in an establishment up in St John’s Wood? He had heard such places existed. Should he find a cab, hurry over there, search about, ask questions, offer a huge sum for her release to him? Or was what the old man had said no less than the truth? ‘You’d be a fool to believe all you hear.’ Then where was Mary? Was she, despite the billhook Jessie’s denial, actually still at the old house? No. Surely it was more likely that she would be somewhere round the Haymarket. Or parading in the Burlington Arcade? Well, no, not there. She was not of the silks and satins class of the Paphians who walked there. But it had been near the Haymarket that he had first encountered her, and had run away from her. It was there he would look.

He spent a terrible time there. Away from the once-again-familiar squalor and rankness of St Giles, surrounded instead by every manifestation of the flowering world, he lost all the growing sense of comfort that he had experienced in his first wild rush back to the underside. But he lost none of the desire to plunge. And that plunge, he still unceasingly felt, must be one locked together with the huge-fleshed, dark, infinitely promising Mulatto Mary.

But around him the tall black silk hats dipped and nodded everywhere, brushed with soft hat-brushes to glossy perfection. And the big crinolines swung and swayed, descending rockingly from carriages while tall footmen waited, making their way sweepingly in and out of the luxury shops, the milliners, the silk mercers, the perfumers, the jewellers. He felt their alienness as if they were so many incomprehensibly gyrating New Zealanders.

And as he strode along the crowded pavements, peering and staring everywhere for a glimpse of richly bronze flesh, there abruptly before him was Asprey's, where he had bought Elizabeth half a dozen small pretty gifts to mark the progress of their life together. He shied away from the heavy doorway like a nervous riding-horse confronted by a steam-engine.

But the thought of Elizabeth did for some moments recall him halfway to his senses. Elizabeth existed. At this moment, no doubt, she would be down at Perkins Rents or at one of the other places she visited, inspecting a newly limewashed stairway, watching over the clearance of some mound of stinking rubbish-impregnated cinders, or down on her knees as he had seen her once teaching a hare-lipped brat to scrub. And at half-past five she would arrive at Red Lion Square, no later, remove her rubber galoshes, change her soiled dress and be ready to take tea in the drawing-room. To take tea and expect him to take it with her. Was it half-past five now?

He pulled from his pocket the watch he had not thought of consulting since he had glanced at it as he had entered the bookshop that morning. No, it was a long way before half-past five. He stepped into a reading-room and wrote a short meaninglessly excusing note, and still had enough foresight left to find a boy and entrust him with the delivering of it to Red Lion Square with the promise of cake in the kitchen to keep him to his word.

An arrangement. Trust. But this was only one gesture towards the world of trust and arrangements. Mary. Mulatto Mary. She was his business now. He must and would find her.

The miserable rasping hours passed as he strode all round the streets of the West End, as far north as Portland Place, as far south as the Strand, chasing will-o'-the-wisp fancy woman after will-o'-the-wisp fancy woman, letting any glimpse of a too flaunting bonnet, a too bright shawl lure him, hurrying paced, away. And when his forays proved fruitless, as they always did, when whatever brazen creature it was he had run after turned and showed a face, garish enough and often promising anything that ingenuity of body could dream of asking, he only cursed that it was not the one dark face that seemed to him the entrance way to full possession of that dark rich world he so much needed.

He thought that the after-dinner hour, when into the whitely gas-lit streets a new influx of pleasure-seekers made their way, all twisting moustaches and flashing eyeglasses, would bring Mary to flaunt herself in front of them. But, though new figures by the score appeared, prostitutes of all sorts from almost the highest to all but the lowest, elegant silk-bonneted creatures warmly shawled against the night cold, youngsters in thin cotton dresses with hats jauntily decorated with a red feather or a blue, and, lurking in the darker by-ways, the drabs and hangers-on rheumy-faced and huddling in the chill of the wind, he got not a glimpse of anyone who might be his dark Mary. Though he heard more than once wild shrieks of laughter and hurried to where he had thought they came from, never did he see Mary striding out as she had long ago done after him, bawling obscenities and yelling her determination to have him.

At last he lost heart. For a little he contemplated going back to St Giles, finding the fly-paper man again and

begging him to say where Mary was. But he knew that he would get no answer till that king in his territory should deign to bestow one. So at a late hour he crept home to bed. To the bed he shared with Elizabeth, the bed with the clean lawn sheets, the plumped pillows, the sturdy bolster, the washed and fluffed layers of blankets, the comfortable weight of the eiderdown in its sprigged and flowery cover, the subdued glint of brass at foot and head. But he swore to himself that he was no more than a traveller at an inn lying there.

And next day he took breakfast opposite Elizabeth, domestic and comfortable as any husband in London, amid the smell of well-cooked haddock and fine buttered eggs, of fresh toast and of tea rising up from the pretty china pot and with *The Times* stiff and crackling in front of him. But he took care to provide a reason for an absence lasting at least till a late hour that night. And then he set out on the hunt once more.

All he could think of, however, was to go to St Giles again. It was there that he had known Mulatto Mary. It was there that he must find her.

But he searched in vain. He spent a whole weary storm-tossed morning prowling through the increasingly familiar streets, among the costers and coster-girls, the criminals and the beggars and all the miscellany of the rookery's inhabitants from stay-lace sellers to chair-menders. He marched time and again past the stalls festooned with cheap clothing and kept by long-locked Jews—'Capth and thlipperth, capth and thlip-perth. Pritheth you won't thee beaten. Capth and thlipperth'—past tawdry Brummagem jewellery stalls, their wares seldom priced above a penny or two, past the rag-and-bottle shops, past the secondhand boot and shoe translators with their leaning rows of patched Wellingtons and Bluchers.

The striking of twelve noon from the church clocks above sent him hastening, much too early, to the Seven Dials itself, to intercept again the fly-paper man, the key to his search, if he should be returning from Piccadilly or wherever in the opulent West End he had been selling his curious wares.

One o'clock struck, and still the beggar-king had not appeared. For a quarter of an hour more he strode up and down the people-thronged pavements where the seven streets met. He was just about to turn into a pastrycook's somewhat cleaner than the generality to buy an Abernethy biscuit or a bun and eke out the time a little when, in the far distance bobbing and weaving over the massed bonnets and hats, the beavers, the billycocks, the wideawakes, the battered fifth-hand and sixth-hand stovepipes, the caps of every sort and description, he saw it, standing out just as he had expected, the high wound-round mass of sticky papers.

He swung away from the door of the pastrycook's with its piles of buns and biscuits and its tall churns of milk, and he hurried, heedless of the dung and mud thick in the roadway, to meet the greasy-coated figure of the old man.

'Good afternoon to you. I am lucky to have come upon you again.'

This time he did not fail to take the tone of client to patron.

The fly-paper man looked at him in silence. But it was plain that he knew him.

'I wonder,' Godfrey said after a little, 'if you would do me the favour of taking a glass? It's a cold day.'

'The Grapes,' the old man rasped out tersely.

And, by no means accompanying Godfrey but rather striding ahead of him careless whether he followed or not, the greasy-coated monarch made his way across to the big open-doored gin-palace he had named. Inside, among the sharp-faced velveteen-coated throng, many with a snuffling

bulldog at their heels, the old man allowed Godfrey to order hot brandy-and-water. And he sipped a good one-third of his glass before he condescended to speak.

‘I mind yer now,’ he said at last. ‘I brought yer back once from up West fer me Kitty, me Kitty what I ain’t see for more’n a year.’

‘You did,’ Godfrey answered.

And then feeling the abasement and even feeling a pleasure in it, he made an addition to his brief acknowledgement.

‘You brought me to her, and I was grateful to you for it. Most grateful indeed.’

‘An’ it’s Mary now, Mulatter Mary.’

‘Yes. Yes, it is. I want her. I must have her. You know where she’s to be found? I’ll pay you, of course. I’ll pay you well. For the information. It’s your due. I’ll pay.’

The old man looked at him in silence. His hat, with its extraordinary covering of fly-dotted sticky papers, was on his head still, sitting low on the lank hair. His two begrimed eyes had an air of plain contempt.

‘You’d pay me five sovereign?’ he asked. ‘Five golden oners?’

‘Yes,’ said Godfrey, defying his mocking incredulity. ‘I’d pay that and gladly.’

The voice of the world of calculations, of nicely balanced accounts and bills paid on the due date, recorded within him that this price, though quite excessive in this neighbourhood as payment for all that a woman could do for a lust-torn man, was not great by comparison with sums often paid out elsewhere for services as nebulous as getting the information he sought. He had written cheques himself for twice the amount on occasion towards charities that interested him really very little. He had paid as much for the difference between a suit of evening clothes in the fullest fashion and one a shade or a season less so.

‘Put it there,’ said the old man. ‘Put it there. On the table. Your gold.’

He was being challenged, challenged like a schoolboy unwisely claiming to know his verses.

He reached at once for his gold-purse and from it, one by one in quick succession, he tumbled five new-minted sovereigns clinking on to the table top.

The old man’s dirt-engrained paw closed over them like the darting talons of a bird of prey.

‘Keep the like o’ that well under the shades ’ereabouts, mister,’ he said rebukingly.

‘Very well.’

For some moments Godfrey did not dare to ask for the information his gold had bought. But at length, in face of the fly-paper man’s continuing silence, he forced himself to speak.

‘And where, please, will I find Mary?’

For a moment or two longer the fly-paper man still kept silent. But before Godfrey could repeat his question he unexpectedly put one of his own.

‘Yer’d do anything to come to ’er, wouldn’t yer? Anything?’

His mind making the discovery, deducing it from the carelessness with which the five sovereigns had been paid out, could be plainly heard in his voice. But Godfrey answered with the simple truth.

‘Yes, I’d do anything.’

He saw the begrimed eyes looking at him with continuing contempt and speculation.

‘I’ll tell yer what,’ the old man said at last.

‘Yes?’

‘I ’ad what yer might call a proposition made ter me not so long ago. A proposition of a gentleman.’

‘Yes?’

Godfrey was acutely aware that the other Godfrey he used to be would at this moment be coldly asking that the bargain be fulfilled, not grovellingly listening to the roundabout talk of the man who should be honouring it, and even urging him to continue.

‘Yes?’ he said again.

‘Yeh. Proposition by a gentleman. Concerning what you might call a lady. A lady. Or a woman. Or a bleeding whore. What you like.’

‘Mary? Was it about Mary?’ Godfrey asked.

‘Nah. Not at all. Not at all.’

And the fly-paper man tapped his empty glass sharply on the table between them.

Godfrey called for two more of the same. And when they had been brought he asked anxiously again, ‘Yes?’

‘Nah, none o’ yer dark whores in the question ‘ere,’ the fly-paper man said ruminatively. ‘One white as can be got’s what’s wanted ‘ere.’

‘Well?’

‘White as can be got, ter lie in the filth.’

‘In the filth? I’m not sure I understand you.’

‘Nah? Then yer’d better. Yer’d better, if yer wants me ‘elp to yer Mulatter Mary.’

There was plain contempt now, totally undisguised. And Godfrey accepted it.

‘What is it that you want then?’

‘I’ll tell yer what I wants. And I’ll tell yer what my gentleman wants, as’ll pay good money for it. He wants ter see a whore a-lying in the filth somewhere, on a dust-heap like, or all among the scourings an’ mess they puts out o’ their ‘ouses. An’ ‘e wants ter see ‘er with a man naked as ‘e was born. An’ the two on ‘em at it there. That’s what ‘e wants. A white-skinned whore and a white-skinned man. A man such as the like o’ you, my gentleman.’

Chapter Twenty-Three

He knew before the cold figure of the fly-paper man had got half way through laying out his proposition not only what it was the old man was going to say but that he was going to accept the monstrous offer.

‘Very well,’ he said curtly. ‘Name your time, name your place. Only let it not be long.’

‘Oh, it’ll not be long,’ the fly-paper man answered, with a leer that showed more of the revengeful beggar than the monarch. ‘My gentleman as wants it, ’e’s in jest as much on a hurry as what you are. Gi’ me till I gets a message to ’im, confidencheral message to ’is club, an’ time fer ’im to say as ’e can come. It won’t be no longer nor that.’

‘And the girl?’ Godfrey asked.

‘Them I can get by the score,’ said the fly-paper man.

So, agreeing simply to meet the old man where they were at nine o’clock that night, he left and found that he could return, cool as you please, to Red Lion Square. It was, he thought, as if he could take the whole of the transaction he had just been part of and place it in a block of ice, to be lowered into an ice-pit this chilly winter weather and there left till rank summer came again for it to be hauled out, broken in an instant into fragments and before long to melt entirely.

He spent the hours away from St Giles exactly as he would have spent them had he not been near the place since before his marriage and had no intention of entering the Grapes at Seven Dials on the stroke of nine that night. He sat in his studio and sketched a little, with no picture on hand having no more serious work to do. He took tea with Elizabeth when she came in. And he listened attentively to a story she had to tell of a woman in a house where a properly trapped drain had just been installed coming up to her and saying, ‘Them drains is nothing more nor a feather in your

cap, madam.' He had laughed, too, with genuine mild amusement.

Elizabeth had worked at her desk in the back-room library afterwards and he had sat by the fire and read a novel, the novel he had been reading for some days past, that he had begun attracted by its serious dealing with a high theme. He had read with interest and pleasure. Then they had dined. The meal had been, as usual, excellent, somewhat plain in style but prepared to bring out the best in the food in the way Elizabeth had long ago encouraged their cook to do.

As soon as Elizabeth had come in he had offhandedly mentioned that he would have to go out after dinner—'a fellow at the club has promised to introduce me to a German acquaintance, a collector'—and so as soon as they had finished he got up, went round to Elizabeth, put a hand on her shoulder and stooped as though he were kissing her cheek. Then he went out into the hall, took his coat and a pair of gloves from the box, settled his broad wideawake on his head, told the maid, Jane, that he might be late and would take a latch-key so that no one need wait up for him and left.

But the moment he felt the cold air of the night on his face he broke into a walk that was nearer a run in his eagerness to be at his destination.

He arrived a few minutes before nine, but the fly-paper man was before him. He was on a bench at a table not far from the lead-covered bar. Further along the same bench there was a woman, sitting very upright and not looking at the old lanky-haired man but nevertheless clearly there with him. The partner in the rites about to be performed.

It was at once obvious why the fly-paper man had chosen her.

She was not particularly young nor startlingly voluptuous. But her fullish face was pale as a rich lily and she had about her, instantly to be seen, an odd air of remote distinction.

Her black silk dress decorated only by a few crushed-looking scarlet bows marked her clearly by its evident shininess and its worn seams as one of the poor, but the unexpected distinction remained. And it would contrast boldly indeed with sordid surroundings and the more sordid threshing of working limbs.

Did he feel any uprising of sexual excitement at the sight of her? He recorded that he did not. Yet he did not doubt that when the time came he would do what had been asked of him. He must. In that black-clothed creamy-skinned withdrawn figure lay his path to Mulatto Mary.

He offered the fly-paper man hot brandy-and-water again.

‘Yes,’ said that bleary-eyed monarch. ‘Brandy-and-water.’

‘And will you take the same?’ he asked the woman.

And her eyes, hitherto subdued and distant, blazed with sudden sharp light.

‘I’ll take it,’ she said.

‘She won’t,’ barked the fly-paper man in almost the same breath.

He stepped half a pace back in surprise at the vehemence of the old man’s pronouncement. His murmured remonstrance at the impoliteness came from the self that had so lately left the house in Red Lion Square.

‘Yer don’t know ‘er then?’ the fly-paper man said.

‘No, I have not hitherto had the honour of the lady’s acquaintance.’

He regretted at once the deliberate cool hauteur of his tone. He must not again arouse the dislike of this king in his territory.

But for once the monarch was prepared to overlook lèse-majesté.

‘Then yer can ‘ave the honour o’ the acquaintance o’ Lushy Lou,’ he said, in grotesque parody of the remark that had been made to him.

‘Lushy Lou?’

‘Yes,’ came the cool and unexpected voice of the woman who was being so callously talked about. ‘Lushy Lou they call me. Louisa was the name my parents gave me, and Lushy describes the condition I aim to achieve just as often as I get the money to do so.’

The words were pronounced in an accent which would not have disgraced any drawing-room in Belgravia.

And the fly-paper man immediately confirmed her account of her failing.

‘Yeh,’ he said. ‘Give ‘er a glass an’ she’s lost ter yer. She’d be no more able ter do what’s ter be done tonight than what she could fly.’

‘No,’ answered Lushy Lou composedly. ‘That’s not so. I find oblivion when I can, and you know it. But I’ll not do what you’ve asked of me without one drink. And you may know that too.’

She challenged the grimy greasy-coated old man with a long calm look. And Godfrey, taking advantage of the fixity of her gaze, was able to observe in the harsh light of the great gasoliers above that the creamy white skin which had so struck him did in fact show lines at the eyes and at the corners of the mouth, traces checked as yet but hardly long to be so of the dissipation to which the body behind them had been put.

‘One drink then, one,’ the fly-paper man at last conceded. ‘Buy ‘er a drain o’ pale. That’s what she likes, pale.’

‘Very well.’

Godfrey ordered hot brandy-and-water for the fly-paper man and himself and for Lushy Lou the finer pale brandy that could be pleasurably swallowed undiluted.

‘Drink up, drink up,’ the fly-paper man said as the glasses were placed in front of them. ‘I’ve told my gentleman half-past nine, and we’ve a fair way to go.’

He hardly need have given the instruction to Lushy Lou. She poured down her brandy in one long swallow and then pushed the glass away from her on the table as if she dared not hold it one instant longer.

Godfrey, abruptly feeling how envied was the liquor hardly touched in his own tumbler, drank it almost as quickly. Only the old king in his long dark greasy coat defied his own orders and sat sipping slowly and with lip-smacking appreciation at his hot potion. Godfrey sat, controlling his impatience and his rage, and divided his attention between the statue-still figure of Lushy Lou and the noisy activity beyond, the sharply jesting thieves, the whores in their tawdry finery, a small child coming to the bar with a jug and reaching up over her head with it to a barmaid.

But even the fly-paper man at last finished his drink and stood up and put on the greasy fur cap that served him in place of the towering daytime emblem of his trade. They went out and made their way through streets filled with dark predatory faces and the sounds of ferocious desperate levity in the glare of lights from shop and stall. But soon the old man had led them into darker lanes and across most of the wild territory of the rookery. And at last, after passing down a narrow alley barely lit by a solitary lamp on a high bracket at the corner, they turned into a court overpowered by the tall black buildings on every side and illuminated only by the pale sky above.

'Take my arm,' Godfrey said to the gliding black figure of Lushy Lou at his side.

Without a word she grasped him by the forearm and together they stumbled after the tall shape of their guide. He preceded them to one of the half-dozen doorways that were dimly discernible round the court and there came to a halt.

'Yer got a match?' he demanded of Godfrey.

Obediently Godfrey felt in the pockets of his coat and produced a lucifer. The old man struck it against the blackened brick of the wall beside him and by its little flare of yellowy-orange light he found a lantern on a shelf just inside the unlocked door and lit it.

Then he led them down a few steps into what, by the hastily passing light, looked to Godfrey like a bare kitchen and through it to a passageway where the light showing through an open door revealed an interior full of shapeless piles of bedding and the unseen but easily to be smelt presence of perhaps some dozen or fifteen sleeping human beings. At the end of the passage a door took them out into a tiny yard.

There the old man stopped and held his lantern high. Godfrey saw that a good part of the yard, which even in the cold of the night stank abominably from the open door of a privy in the corner and the deep puddle, apparently floating with excrement, in front of it, was occupied by a low lean-to building attached to the back wall of the house. And he saw too that from the roof of this construction almost all the boards had been stripped, recently enough to judge by the whiteness of the pair of joists revealed and the loose stack of timber up against the yard wall.

Once the fly-paper man was sure that the two of them had seen this building and its open roof he lowered the lantern and turned to stare up at the rear of one of the houses looking down on the little yard. Following his gaze, Godfrey saw what he realised at once he was meant to see, the silhouette, black against some dim interior light, of a man wearing a cloak buttoned to the neck and, unmistakably, a tall silk hat. Glowing like a tiny point of fire just beneath this there was the tip of a lighted cigar, held between unmoving lips.

The fly-paper man turned, when he saw that they had noted the presence of the watcher above, and, stooping,

entered the lean-to by its low door. Godfrey, still giving his arm to his silent companion, presumed that they were expected to follow. He did so, urging Lushy Lou slightly forward and discovering in the process that she was shivering hard, though whether this was all because she was wearing no more in the cold than a black shawl over her black dress he could not tell. Inside, he saw that the old man was occupied in lighting from the smoky tallow stub in the lantern a row of incongruous-looking office candles, borrowed or purloined from heaven knows what clerks' desks. There were, he reckoned, nine or ten of them, standing on the floor of the little room, and soon their combined light was illuminating the small box of a place as if it were a theatre.

They showed a curious sight too. There was no furniture of any sort, only, lying thick on the floor everywhere, paper. Torn and shredded, dirt-stamped and sharp-smelling, mud-smeared and often coated with road-dung, it lay in a deep layer from one side of the room to the other. Brown paper and greyed-over white paper, newspaper and parcel wrappings, old handbills, letters and envelopes and long strips peeled from bills on walls with here and there gigantic yellow, red or blue capitals plainly to be seen. In the corners there were four or five sacks, but otherwise everywhere it was simply paper.

In a moment Godfrey realised what the place must be. It was the lair—there could be no other word—of a paper-gatherer. He had seen such people often enough, old men generally grubbing about with a sack picking up any scrap of paper they could find. He knew that they must get a price for their pickings, though doubtless a small enough one. But he had never drawn the inference that there would therefore be here and there all over London places such as this, places where the gatherers stored their dirt-impregnated sour-smelling booty.

Well, it should make a foul enough sight for the watcher above. The silhouette with the tiny glowing point of the cigar tip.

The old man straightened from lighting the last of the big thick yellowy candles. Their light sent dramatic shadows leaping upwards across his face and made him indeed a very demon-king about to cast his spell.

Yet it proved a flatly prosaic incantation when it was uttered.

'Get to it then. Give 'im what he wants ter see. Give it 'im good, or by God yer'll get no payment from me, neither one o' yer nor t'other.'

And he was gone, moving swiftly out of the brightly lit little room to vanish in the cold darkness.

Godfrey looked at Lushy Lou. For a long moment she regarded him steadily in return in the hardly wavering light of the long row of thick candles.

'And I'll have that pay,' she said at last with soft intensity. 'I'll have it. I must.'

'And I mine. I too must and shall.'

As at a signal given, they both then began simultaneously to take off their clothes. One by one Godfrey flung his garments behind him, gloves, hat, paletot, coat, one shoe, then the other, one sock scraped off the foot while standing stork-like and ridiculous, the other sock similarly, waistcoat, then braces taken down and trousers lowered to be clumsily stepped out of, tie next wrenched from his neck, then shirt with its studs sprung open by main force and the whole pulled up and over, next the vest of pure white wool, with the cold striking now on his bare skin. And, opposite him—his eyes had scarcely left her, even in the most awkward parts of his undressing—the cold was now too striking on Lushy Lou's bare arms and on her legs bare to the upper thighs. Only now her chemise, he supposed. And his undertrousers.

He pushed them off, stamping them from his ankles with his bare feet. In front of him she lifted her chemise—it was patched in more than one place, he saw—and there she was naked as he.

And she had a body as creamily white as her lily-rich face had promised. The watcher above must be feeling that part at least of his bargain had been fulfilled. Then, at the thought of that watcher, of the little glowing cigar point, what Godfrey had so far not experienced at all came with sudden urgency—sexual excitement.

He dropped to his knees on the yielding filthy paper layer, extended his arms, took the ripe white-skinned woman in front of him by her waist and hips and pulled her towards him.

They made love then, blatant exhibitionist love. They made it with every wild device the unseen, but always felt, watcher at the window above could have wanted. They caressed with darting tongues. They flung themselves full length in the filth on the floor and rolled now one way up now another. He stood while she, face deep in the trodden mess, thrust buttocks up both to him and that cigar-point watcher. Once they lurched round and round, in imminent danger of knocking over the solemn row of fat office candles, with her legs tucked under his arms wheelbarrow fashion.

And only once did they falter. It was when, rolling into one of the corners, Godfrey came into sharp contact with a sack there and found it to be not springy paper but knobby as if it were filled with stones. He let out an involuntary yelp of pain and Lushy Lou, advancing towards him with out-thrust pelvis, halted and asked what the matter was.

He told her.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I know well what’ll be in there.’

‘Stones. But why?’

‘No, not stones. Dogs’ leavings.’

‘Dogs— Do you mean he collects those?’

‘Of course. Once I did not know such work was part of the way the world goes. But tanners use the droppings of dogs, and someone must bring them what they’ll pay for.’

For a few moments he sat on the thick papery layer and digested this curious fact. But he was not there and being paid to be there to indulge in philosophical speculations.

He looked up through the open roof. The solitary watcher was lighting a fresh cigar.

‘Come on then,’ he said to Lushy Lou.

So they joined again and gave, each of them, full value. They cursed and swore and shouted obscenities at each other. They attacked each other with lacerating nails and stinging ringing slaps. He staggered to and fro with her legs clasped tight around his waist and their mouths locked in a long prying kiss. And at the climax he stood holding her upside-down in front of him, her thighs on his shoulders, her face at his crotch.

Then at last they subsided to the churned and filthy floor, inert.

Lying on his back beside her, he saw in the quiet cold night beyond a tiny glowing tip of fire move swiftly downwards and be suddenly squashed out. The black silhouette in the tall silk hat disappeared.

‘He’s gone,’ he said, feeling abruptly that he must make some human contact with the fellow being he had made so much animal contact with until a few moments before.

She lay there silent. The steady light of the long row of solid candles shone on her white, white skin and the smears and stains and scratches that now disfigured it. But after a little she too spoke, as if extending a helping hand to some stranger in need of it.

‘We earned what he’ll give us.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘We earned it.’

He lay on in silence again. The encroaching chill was drying the sweat on his body and he supposed too that the fly-paper man would come before very long. But he did not feel able to move.

‘Tell me,’ he said eventually, ‘how was it you came to this? You’re a lady. No need to tell me that. How did it happen?’

She laughed.

One dry little laugh in the still of the night.

‘I was the daughter of a clergyman,’ she said. ‘It’s what they all tell you, don’t they? The others of my trade?’

‘So they say. But how? How?’

‘Oh, a common enough tale. A poor clergyman cannot keep a daughter at home. I found a position as a governess. I was young then and pretty. No, I was beautiful. And there was a son of the house. It was like the worst sort of novel, in every detail. But with the sad demerit of being true. There was a child. I could not go back home. I tried to support myself and the baby by painting little scenes of flowers and shepherdesses. I had some talent.’

Again she laughed, that short dry laugh that was nearer a sob.

‘Well, you can imagine how well I prospered. The child died. He had become ill. I could afford nothing he needed. And afterwards there was drink for oblivion, and whoring for drink.’

Godfrey said nothing. What was there, he thought, to say? The woman by his side, the woman with whom he had committed those recent acts, was not of his world, not of the world he was seeking to enter now. She was a stranger in it, picked up by a chance wind and left on its shores.

He heard a noise outside, the scraping open of the leaning door from the house.

‘He’s coming,’ he said.

Quickly they rose, picked up garments from the heaps in the corners where they had tossed them, began scrabbling their way into them, hastily, messily.

The fly-paper man came in. He took no notice of them as they finished their dressing but instead stooped and one by one blew out the row of fat oily candles, leaving only the last to light them back to the house.

They each of them finished their task at much the same time. The fly-paper man turned to lead them away. But Lushy Lou put a hand on his arm.

‘You owe me money,’ she said.

‘Oh, ‘ave it then, ‘ave it.’

The old man thrust a hand into the deep drooping-edged pocket of his long coat and after a good deal of grubbing about he produced a single coin. Godfrey saw, as the beggar-king thrust it out and Lushy Lou’s white hand closed on it, that it was no more than a half sovereign.

‘Is that all?’ he exclaimed quite involuntarily.

The old man glared at him with spiteful rage.

‘It’s no more nor less than what was pledged for,’ he snarled. ‘Come on.’

He moved quickly through the low doorway and Godfrey could do nothing other than follow. But, as they made their way through the darkened house and the court on the far side that was almost as dark, he felt in the pocket of his hastily thrust-on coat, found his gold-purse and extracted two of the few sovereigns in it.

Out in the alley beyond the court, as Lushy Lou, clergyman’s daughter, gathered her old shawl about her shoulders in preparation for leaving them, he tapped her on the elbow and proffered the additional coins.

They would go in pale brandy, no doubt. But if that was the oblivion she chose she might at least get a just quantity of it for what she had done.

Lushy Lou grasped the gold quickly as she had grasped the fly-paper man's small dole. She murmured some sound of gratitude. And then she hurried away towards the feeble light of the high lamp at the corner.

But the fly-paper man had realised what transaction had taken place.

'Yer're a fool,' he said.

'That's as may be,' Godfrey answered. 'But the lady is not the only one to be paid for this night's work. I want mine now.'

For a long moment the old man, the defied king, did not answer. And Godfrey found himself ready to take him by his scrawny throat. But he had no need.

'Oh, right enough,' the old man grated out at last. 'If that's what yer're wanting. Yer'll find yer Mulatter Mary down Rotherhithe way.'

'Whereabouts there?' Godfrey barked.

The old man looked for an instant confused, a scorned monarch. Then he answered.

'By—why, by St Paul's Church. There's a beerhouse there. Called the Globe an' Pigeons. That's where I told 'er ter wait, yer Mary.'

Godfrey looked at him. But there was no more to be squeezed out. He knew now at last what he had worked for to learn. Mulatto Mary was within grasp.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Quickly as a hansom could take him, he made his way across the river and down to Rotherhithe, bullying and bribing the reluctant driver to take him through this dubious area at least as far as St Paul's Church. From there he had to walk. But he strode off along the dank and mist-swathed street careless of any danger and fast as his feet would take him. Mulatto Mary was to be found within perhaps a few hundred yards. She was to be found, she was there to accost, there to be swept up, there for him in her and with her to drown. To drown where, to the exclusion of every other thought and feeling, he wished to drown.

There were few lights and few people in this quarter of for the most part mean one-storey houses with the chill of the river and the flat river smell everywhere about. But, above, a half-moon now had risen to shine through gaps in the clouds and he was able to make good speed. Soon he saw a house at a corner, taller than those around it, with its boarded walls broken by the cheerful squares of red-curtained windows. Would this be the Globe and Pigeons? Would Mulatto Mary be there now, taking a glass, bold, strident, confident, looking round to pick up some seaman flush with money?

He hurried forward. But when he came close to the house he saw that, although it was a tavern, its vilely painted sign was that of the Stump and Magpie. No bird of that shape would ever fly, he thought to himself with a touch of savagery. He thrust open its single door, however, made his way across the sanded floor to the bar and inquired of the crop-headed potboy there for directions to the Globe and Pigeons. Luckily he divined from the surly look he got that this had been a tactless request and was able to put things quickly right by ordering some sherry. He took a sip—and an appallingly nasty sherry it was—and then explained that he

had an appointment at the Globe and Pigeons or otherwise would be very pleased to stay where he was. And so he got his directions.

He would not have far to go, down a short street at the next turning, across a swing bridge near the end of it, past a boatyard he could not mistake and along the lane he would find behind it till he reached his destination. He downed as much as he could of the rest of the sherry and set off.

He was relieved to encounter no other human beings than one trio of blue-jacketed Norwegian or Swedish sailors, wild drunk, singing unintelligibly and with two of them waving weighty-looking cudgels. Happily just as he came up to them one dropped his glazed hat and while they were searching the muddy surface of the street for it he contrived to walk unnoticed by. He found the bridge, mercifully already swung across its deep mud-filled creek between two docks, and on the far side had little difficulty in seeing the dark mass of the boathouse.

But hardly had he set foot in the shadow-filled lane just past this when he saw another small group of mist-wrapped figures coming quite quickly towards him. He hesitated but then decided to go forward. The Globe and Pigeons was not far away. Then the leading figure in the advancing group also halted for a moment and an instant or two later the light of a bullseye shone out and he was able to see that he was confronting a policeman, heavy in oilskin cape and tall in crested helmet. He walked forward. Soon he realised that the two men behind the policeman were carrying a shutter between them and that resting on this was a dripping sodden form that must surely be under the covering someone drowned.

‘Who’s there?’ the policeman called, gruff and confident.

And abruptly his feeling of mild welcome at encountering a friendly figure disappeared. The police existed to assist the inhabitants of the civilised world against depredations

from below, and he was no longer of the civilised world. The cheerful bullseye light was double-edged. It was as double-edged as the light that had shone on him once in Shadwell on the day he had wandered all about the docks on the first occasion that he had deserted Elizabeth. That softly searching light had sent him back to her. But now he had no intention of going back.

‘Good evening, policeman,’ he said, hesitatingly enough.

‘Lost your way, sir?’ the policeman answered, responding to the gentlemanly voice and bringing his light tactfully to illuminate the wall just beside him.

‘Well, yes, I suppose I have,’ he said. ‘I have been walking and the mist ...’

‘Yes, sir. I dare say. Well, if you’ll take my advice, sir, you won’t linger in these parts. There’s more than one about here as’d rob you at the mere sound of your voice, sir. So, if you’d care to step along with us, I’ll put you on your way.’

There was nothing to do but comply with the polite but firm request, furious though he felt at fate having placed such an obstacle in his way. He tramped along beside the policeman at the head of the melancholy little procession. Over the swing-bridge they went and the gleaming black mud below and back in precisely the way he had come.

At last, to put himself on friendly terms with his protector so as to be able to leave him if opportunity arose, he asked about the sad sight on the shutter behind.

‘A girl, sir. We’ve just hooked her from the river. Washed down from Waterloo Bridge as like as not, with the way the tide’s running now.’

‘Suicide?’ he said.

‘Oh, yes, sir. We get ’em down here, sir, the unfortunites, three or four a month. More in winter, less in summer.’

They tramped along in silence for a little in the moonlit mist.

Godfrey thought of Kitty and of how more than once such a fate as the poor drowned object's behind them had been predicted for her. It was an end, a sodden cold and watery end, to which not a few of her fellow harlots came, though perhaps not as many as the would-be-goods liked to think. There had been the girl Rosy too back in the St Giles house, established now no doubt these many years in ownership of her comfortable coffeehouse.

They came to the Stump and Magpie and, seizing the chance, he made a great parade of recognising it and knowing his way back to better parts. With a last ponderous warning about the danger of the neighbourhood, the policeman bade him goodnight.

He strode rapidly away. And, as soon as he was sure he had well outpaced the little funeral party, he wheeled off down the first turning that presented itself. If he could just double round, he thought, he would easily come up to the Globe and Pigeons without too much loss of time.

But he had reckoned without the lack of order in the building of the rows of mean little houses all around. No streets here were laid out in neat lines with exact right-angles at the corners. And within five minutes he had lost any sense even of where the river lay, for all that the mists emanating from it were cold and clammy on his face.

He strode on nevertheless, unable to slacken his pace little though he knew in what direction he was heading. He wanted to encounter a passer-by now, no matter how dangerous looking, as strongly as half an hour earlier he had hoped to avoid them. But the little muddy chancily moonlit streets were totally empty.

Then at last, turning cautiously down a narrow sloping way, he glimpsed the river, black and mist-wreathed, and the sloping mudbanks of the strand and paused to look about him, a little uncertain now whether he needed to go upstream or down to get to his destination.

And as he stood there a puff of cuttingly cold wind dispersed the mist all round him. It revealed the spars and cordage of a pair of ships lying out in mid-stream and the backs of the low houses behind him supported over the river mud by water-smoothed and slimy piles. And it revealed too, not two yards from him, an old upended pushcart propped in the shelter of a low stone causeway and in it, clear to be seen, a boy lying asleep.

He was huddling round a battered black canister as if clasping it for warmth, which, since he had only a short jacket and a pair of ragged trousers ending at the calf for protection, must have been very necessary. Taking a step nearer, Godfrey saw that the canister must be the boy's working equipment, a small brazier from which he would sell something. Perhaps it had some vestiges of heat in it still. He leant forward and saw inside a short length of something whitish. Some eel. It was a hot-eel boy.

He was pathetically thin, the bare legs under the ragged trousers fine as a bird's with the feet curled round much like a bird's and black almost to the ankle with mud, as if they were slippered. His face in the moonlight was white as candlegrease.

Standing looking down at him, so miserable even in sleep, made so wretched by the conditions of his life, Godfrey remembered abruptly the boy that he and Elizabeth had seen asleep on top of a barge on the soft spring night they had gone down to Greenwich together, well before they were married. That boy had seemed a gift to them from a world of fairy-like unreality. He remembered that they had stood in silence plainly with the same thoughts passing through their minds at the sight of him, lying there so tranquilly cradled on the broad stream. It was a far distance from that lad to this one.

Suddenly he experienced a rush of determination to do something for this world-bruised scrap of humanity. He

would do good by stealth. He would leave a coin for the lad to find when he woke. It could not be much. He had little enough on him. But small though it might be such a gift would be wealth to a wretch like this. It would easily enable him amply to restock his supply of eel to sell next day. It might even set him on the path to commercial success, so little must lie in these poverty-stricken parts between utter destitution and a modest competence. Indeed, this one small financial fillip might be all that was needed to set the lad on a steadily climbing path. With a tiny unexpected capital—a sixpence would even be enough—he would be placed in quite a different position from the hand-to-mouth existence he must lead every day. He could even grow and prosper. Why, he might end his days a wealthy man. Stranger things had happened.

He hunted in his pockets and found indeed a sixpence. And, conscious suddenly of behaving very much out of his present character in setting the poor sleeping wretch on even an imagined path to prosperity and dignity, he bent forward and placed the coin on the bottom of the lad's canister beside the congealed fragment of unsold eel.

Yet he walked away smiling a little to himself at his unexpected fairy godfatherhood. At his sixpenny largesse.

And the notion brought to mind a child he had not thought of at all during the transaction, the mud-daubed imp—was it boy or girl?—who had gained another sixpence at Greenwich on that same night. The one who had forced her head into the ooze and had afterwards confronted the silk-hatted spectators on the lighted balconies with that disturbing mixture of proud contempt and pure joy in the act she had performed. She had earned her money. And she had made sure she got it, too, forcing herself across the mud to pick it up when the flung coin had fallen short. And only then giving vent to her moment of curious triumph.

Suddenly his feet brought him to a halt. The sixpence he had just bestowed, had that too not fallen a little short of its objective? Simply placed in that canister next to the fragment of unbought eel, was it not quite likely to be stolen while the boy was still asleep? After all, he had succeeded in putting it there without at all disturbing the lad. And the moon was shining full on it.

He turned, walked back, extracted the coin from the canister and began to slide it, carefully as he could, into one of the clenched and dirty fists.

But he had reckoned without the attributes of any boy brought up on the banks of the Thames. In an instant the lad woke, leapt up still hugging his canister and crouched on the boards at the foot of the pushcart, ready at a flick to spring away and be lost in the night.

Godfrey seized on the first thought that came into his head to reassure the lad.

'The Globe and Pigeons?' he said rapidly. 'I am seeking it and have lost my way. I woke you to ask your help.'

The pale-faced crouching boy looked at him with suspicion still.

'Globe an' Pigeons,' he said huskily. ' 'S jus' round the corner.'

'Ah, thank you,' Godfrey said, adding, since he was still holding his magic coin, 'perhaps you could tell me something else and earn a sixpence.'

'A sprat?'

The eyes in the pale face widened in astonishment at such luck.

'Tell me,' Godfrey said, 'do you know of a woman they call Mulatto Mary?'

'That blower?' the boy answered, becoming noticeably more cocky from the nature of the inquiry. 'I knows 'er like I knows the back o' me 'and.'

'You do, do you? So you could tell me if it's likely she's to be found in the Globe and Pigeons just now?'

'Nah,' said the boy scornfully.

Then, seeing the rush of disappointment sweeping his mysterious questioner's face and fearing perhaps for his 'sprat', he quickly added more information.

'She was there all right. This mornin'. Born jus' round 'ere she was, an' she comes back ter the Pigeons jus' like she was a blessed pigeon 'erself.'

He paused to blow on his cold hands. And then looked up at Godfrey with a yet more knowing air.

'An' I could tell yer where she is now,' he said. 'Straight I could.'

'Where is she then?'

'Fer another sprat I could tell yer.'

Godfrey smiled.

'You shall have one,' he said. 'But true telling, mind.'

'True as the tide,' the boy swore.

And Godfrey, apprehending what an inexorable part the tide must play in the affairs of a riverside urchin, felt strongly inclined to believe that what he was about to hear would be the truth so far as his young informant knew it.

'Well?'

'Up over St Giles, she is,' the boy said. 'I never been that way, mind. But I knows on it, and I knows true. There's a place there with an old fly-paper cove and—'

The expression of fury on Godfrey's face brought him to a halt.

'You knows on 'im, the fly-paper cove?' he asked.

'I do.'

'Then that's where yer'll find Mulatter Mary. Called back by 'im she was, jus' today. An' back she went.'

Godfrey gave the boy the two sixpences. He would have liked to have given him more, only he was not at all sure

whether he had enough first for Mary and, as important, to get him back to St Giles as fast as a cab would take him. And he dared not risk delay.

Sitting at last in a cab—an old four-wheeler, smelling appallingly from the sodden straw on its floor, was all he had been able to find—Godfrey went over in his mind for the twentieth time just what must have happened. The fly-paper man, the St Giles king among the other monarchs of that lawless land, must have been fully prepared to honour his agreement and had sent across to Rotherhithe for Mary, to have her ready for when he himself had completed his side of the bargain. She had been so near. But his own impulsive gift to Lushy Lou, that piece of left-over charitableness from the world of charities and calculations, must have turned the old man against him. There had been, now that he came to think of it, something hesitant and even shifty in the old man's manner when he had been giving directions for Rotherhithe. Plainly the king had decided then to manifest his displeasure and had sent him off on his fool's errand.

But having no need of Mary now in St Giles and perhaps fearing that he himself, thwarted down among the river mists and mean houses, might come angrily back, would not the old man send her away somewhere?

So there was no time to lose.

But the cab was a wretched vehicle. The driver, despite all entreaties and later threats, sat sulkily determined to go no faster than he wanted, and he plainly wanted to go damnably slowly. And the horse, which Godfrey frequently standing up and thrusting his head out of the window became well acquainted with, was a fearful bony animal that looked as if the cold night chill had long ago invaded it to the marrow. Nor was there money to spare to offer the only inducement that might have had some effect.

He sat and fretted.

He had eventually found the ancient contraption near the eastern end of Tooley Street and it had seemed to take as long as would be reasonable for the whole journey just to traverse the length of that long and dismal thoroughfare. Then at last they came to London Bridge, mercifully at this late hour as empty of traffic as at morning and evening it was thronged with vehicles of every sort, jostling, cutting and thrusting, with its pavements equally crowded, two slow-moving masses of foot passengers, clerks and porters, old men and boys, the well-dressed and the ragged, all sucked towards or spewed out of the vast enterprise of the City. But now there was only a single red letter-van dashing southwards at a great rate, doubtless heading for the railway station, its lively horses' hooves striking sparks from the cobbles. He gave it a glance of furious envy. But at last they entered the deserted streets beyond to go lugubriously by the great banks and proud commercial houses. Then they crept at interminable length along under the shadow of St Paul's, slowing even to descend Ludgate Hill, where often he had seen dashing stockbrokers taking the slope up at a spanking trot on their late morning way to their offices, delighting to show off the paces of their latest stable acquisitions. Then they clopped along Fleet Street as if they were setting the pace for a funeral procession, and crawled through Covent Garden, before long to be enlivened by the arrival of carts bringing produce from the country and doubtless lumbering along faster than this miserable rate of progress. And then Long Acre, and a long acre indeed they made of it, till Godfrey, breaking down at last, ordered a halt, leapt down and took to his own swift-striding legs.

There were still a good many people about. St Giles went to bed either very early or very late. But the idling harlots and predatory men were not so thick on the pavements as earlier, and it was possible to make unimpeded progress. He

strode through, evoking only now and again a loud Irish curse.

And then he was within only a few yards of that narrow blocked-off alley. And then he was at its entrance.

There, abruptly, he came to a full halt. A knot of people, mostly women, had gathered in the lantern-lit doorway of the first house into the alley. They were laughing and loudly talking and all looking at a solitary incongruously silk-hatted figure standing addressing them, a large white note-taking pad held before him.

It was, of all people, Arthur Balneal.

For a full half-minute Godfrey stood where he was, staring at this altogether unexpected sight. Had the Celebrated Investigator chanced at that moment to turn round he would have seen the husband of his valued lady colleague on the Committee of the Society for the Promotion of Sanitary Visiting Among the London Poor as a person plainly at home in the midst of this notorious area. But Arthur Balneal was too busy making entries on his large white pad of paper with a large well-trimmed pencil.

An unexpected sight, he had at first thought. But reflection made him see that this apparition was in fact quite easily accounted for. Balneal was an investigator. The homes of the squalid London poor were his chosen field. What more likely than that he should bend his formidable attentions on St Giles?

His next instinct when he had fully seized on Balneal's presence was to retreat. But at once he saw that he could not. If he crept away it might be at the very time the fly-paper man came out of the house at the far end of the alley with Mulatto Mary.

No, he must stay where he was. Or, no again, he must do more than that. He did not know of any other way out of the alley, but it was a byword that St Giles was honeycombed with secret passages and tunnellings constructed over the

years to defeat the rare raids of police parties. There could well be some tunnel, from behind perhaps an old bin that stood in the dark kitchen of the far house, leading into the cellar of a house in the next row. The fly-paper man could even at this instant be urging Mary's ample form on her hands and knees along some such escape way.

Balneal was peering through his large spectacles at one of the harlots on the doorstep of the first house, her arms folded arrogantly in front of the low-cut bosom of her garish dress. She was answering some question, it seemed. And from the look of vexation on Balneal's pale countenance she was not answering in the prescribed form.

So, if he were to walk quietly past now? To walk past and to go softly up the alley and in at the door of the house at the end?

Of course, Balneal might at any moment turn and see him. And, sadly, the moon was shining through a large break in the clouds and the poles generally hung with drying clothes were bare. Nor would the slight disguise of his wideawake hat serve very well. But he must get to Mary.

He set quietly out.

As he passed behind the solemn investigator, not more than two yards away from him in the narrow entrance of the alley, the harlot was still holding his full attention. Softly onwards. Breaking into the hurried pace he craved for would be almost bound to alert, not Arthur Balneal, but the sharp-eyed citizens at present giving him their delighted interest. And they would, like as not, be quick to point out to the investigator the sight of a fellow gentleman in these parts. With a coarse comparison, no doubt.

He reached the far end of the alley. Shortly before he got there he had heard a louder-than-before burst of laughter. But he had not dared to turn and see whether he was the object of it. He pushed at the familiar time-darkened door

and an instant later he was in the comforting gloom of the house.

He tumbled down the steps into the cellar in one wild rush. And there was the fly-paper man. He was sitting at the big table, quite near the fire, eating a piece of cheese. But of Mulatto Mary there was no sign.

He flung himself towards the lank-haired monarch with the rind of cheese.

‘Now then,’ he shouted in the most ringing tones of authority he could muster, ‘where is Mary? Where have you hidden her, you damnable villain? Out with it. Out with it this instant. Or, by God, I’ll have the police on to you the moment you set foot out of St Giles. I’ll hound you. I’ll hound you and hound you till you wish to heaven you had never set eyes on me.’

As his tirade swept him on—and after so many checks and so much frustration he found himself more carried away than he knew he ought to be—he saw a series of expressions appear and disappear on the grimy visage looking up at him. Shock had come first. But that went quickly. There followed, and nor did this last long, a look of keen rage. And then came what might have been a sullen determination on vengeance, except that it too was so briefly present that it was difficult to be sure. And lastly and more lengthily there appeared a lugubrious sorrow.

And it was this that found expression when at last he shouted himself to a stop.

‘Sir, sir. Oh, sir, there’s no need for this. No need at all. Was you a-thinking I’d gone back on my bargain? Oh, sir, the very last thing that’d enter my old head. No, no. It was all most unfort’nate. No sooner ’ad you left me, sir, an’ I ’ad come back ’ere to take a bit o’ supper than who should walk in through the door but the creetur ’erself. Made a mistake in the message I sent ’er, she ’ad. Told ’er to stay where she

was, an' instead she come over 'ere directly. I trounced 'er for it, sir. I trounced 'er good.'

Godfrey decided to ignore the show.

'Then where is she now?' he demanded. 'Is she in the house here?'

He glanced furiously all round, as if expecting somehow to see evidence of Mary's nearness.

'Why, sir, seeing as 'ow we wasn't expecting you no more, not to put too fine a point upon it, she's with a cove, sir, as is paying five shillin' for the privilege. But 'e won't be long, sir. I'll 'ave 'im out of it in a trice. I won't 'ave the likes of 'im stand in the way of a gentleman. I'll go over directly.'

'Go over? Where is she? Speak up, you damnable rogue.'

'Never fear, she's close at 'and, sir. Never fear. It so 'appened we'd no room 'ere, sir, so I 'ad to put 'er— Well, in a place you know well, sir.'

'Where? Where? Damn you.'

'Why, in the paper-gatherer's place, sir. Yer'll know that's right enough fer it.'

And the maltreated king gave him a leer of sharp revenge.

'Then take me to her,' Godfrey said brusquely. 'I'm not having you make off with her under my nose again.'

'No, sir, no. Stand up fer yer rights, sir. We'd none on us get anywhere in this world unless we did that. You jus' foller me, sir, an' yer'll see yer light o' love in less nor five minutes, sir.'

The old man got up, groped for his greasy fur cap and led the way up the steps out of the kitchen.

It was only then that Godfrey remembered Arthur Balneal. Would the Celebrated Investigator still be putting his questions at the end of the alley?

'Stop a moment,' he said to the fly-paper man. 'Is there no other way out of this place? No back way? No tunnel?'

‘No, sir, no. None o’ that. There’s times I’ve wished there was I don’t mind telling yer that, as a gentleman. But we ‘ave to go the straight way, sir. The straight way.’

Godfrey determined to brave the risk. If Balneal saw him in company with this notorious pander, why then he saw him.

Yet, stepping out, he could not but dart a glance along the alley that was full of a slyness he could have wished not to possess.

The knot of laughing statistics fodder at the doorway of the first house had disappeared, however. He marched along the rubbish-strewn unpaved way behind the fly-paper man with his head held high. But at the corner he again felt compelled to glance furtively round to see if all was clear. And he thought he caught a fast-vanishing glimpse of a shiny silk hat. But it was difficult to be certain. And in any case Mulatto Mary was, surely, only a few minutes away now.

‘Mend your pace,’ he tersely instructed the old man, who had lapsed into something of a shuffle.

They hurried on. And at last they came to the entrance to the house in the little night-black court. Once again he lent the old fly-paper man a match and once more the old man found the lantern just inside the door, lit it and showed him in.

But this time when they reached the passage leading to the yard at the back a figure appeared in the far doorway.

Even in the first rays of the dim lantern Godfrey knew that it was her. He glimpsed the whites of her eyes and then saw her broad bronze face.

It was as he had seen it in his thoughts a thousand times. From the deepest recesses of his mind he had dredged it up, perfect in every detail, from that period three years before when he had seen her from time to time at the other house. He had got her right.

'Mary,' he said.

'Somebody wantin' me?'

He recalled her voice now. Those deep vowel-rolling sounds that seemed to be offering him, even in only two or three syllables, a long sloping verdant path leading down and down to something he still could not guess at in its entirety but cried out for and cried out for with all that was ever in him.

'Yes,' he said, 'I want you, Mary. I've wanted you for a long, long time, though I would never let myself believe it.'

She came towards him as he stood beside the greasy-coated form of the fly-paper man and peered at him closely.

'I 'member yo,' she said. 'I 'member yo from two, three years back. Yo was the gennelman that wouldn't and wouldn't have Mary.'

'I was. The more fool I.'

'An' yo come axing fo' Mary now?'

'I am. I am.'

'Yo 'member her all that time?'

'I have indeed.'

'Yo lucky gennelman. I'se only jus' come from Rotherhithe way. So I'se all the time in the world fo' yo.'

She leant forward then and enveloped him in a huge embrace. He felt her dress-straining breasts warm against him, heard the thudding of her heart, smelt her musky odour. Regardless of the watching face of the fly-paper man and of the patent lie he had told about the five-shilling cove, he put his hands on to her great spreading hips and pressed her hard against him.

And once he had run away from her. He had dodged and sprinted as he had not done for years when he had encountered her in Coventry Street and she, a little drunk perhaps, even a little mad, had openly pursued him. That

night, the night he had earlier first met Elizabeth at the Bosworths' ball.

He felt intoxicated with happiness.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It was a wonder to him when by the light of the cold moon shining through the boardless roof of the paper-gatherer's little room he saw Mulatto Mary naked. And, unlike many of the whores he had gone with, she had delightedly and at once, despite the chill of the night, stripped off shawl, gaudy green dress, thick but holed serge petticoat, stockings, shoes and chemise.

'We gonna be warm, the two of us,' she had said, standing in front of him, a thick bronze ebulliently carved pillar of flesh. 'We gonna have warm work in here.'

He had looked at her. She was superb, with big round forward-spreading breasts, with smooth rounded stomach that he could hardly wait till he had kissed and licked and stroked over every inch.

He had snatched off his own clothes, once more in this room, gloves, hat, paletot, coat, shoes, socks, tie, waistcoat, trousers, vest and undertrousers, and had flung them wildly to the floor.

Then they joined, with a shock of bare flesh on bare flesh that boomed like a cannon-shot in the little papers-strewn chamber. And he surrendered to her, felt and welcomed the kisses of her generous mouth on every part of his body, responded utterly, was lost.

Indeed, had he found his goal at any earlier time in his quest he knew that in his overpowering desire he would have spent copiously and vigorously almost as soon as she had hurtled him on to her warmly pulsating body. But in this same box of a room not so many hours earlier he had already expended himself not a little in the performance with the lily-white Lushy Lou that the fly-paper monarch had demanded as his price for putting him on the path he had so wanted. So in the event, though he at once felt himself sunk fathoms deep in the dark waters he had utterly desired, it

was a long road that led towards the expected towering climax.

He was still at some distance from that end, though he saw it ahead with heart-thudding breath-gasping certainty, when with appalling suddenness the door of the little chamber was pulled squeakingly open and an old high-raised querulous voice exploded above them.

'You. It's you. It's you, you bloody mulatto whore.'

'Go 'way. Go 'way. We're just a-coming,' Mary shouted, raising and thrusting her bronze bulk up and down over him with redoubled force.

'No, you don't,' the aged voice thundered hollowly.

Godfrey, in face of the intrusion, could not go on. He moved his head on the thick-layered paper to see who had thus interrupted them.

It was no doubt the paper-gatherer. He was a little old man, eighty at least from the look of him and not five feet tall, dressed in an old coat much too big for him wrapped round and secured with a piece of rope. In one hand he held a flickering smoky farthing dip, in the other his collecting sack.

But Mary was not so easily checked.

'Move, move,' she yelled down into his ear. 'Don' let that bugger stop you. Come on, gennelman, come on.'

'You would, would you?' the paper-gatherer shouted. 'You creature of ungodliness, you whore of Babylon. Defile the Temple of the Lord, would you? You blaspheming bitch, you devil of unrighteousness.'

'Go 'way. Go 'way.'

And frantically Mary tried to restore the fast-declining channel of sensuality between them.

'Avaunt thee, Satan,' the little old man shrieked.

And he stepped forward, raised his sack and brought it down with tremulous rage, again and again, on Mary's broad

naked back.

‘No. Stop, stop. Oh, stop,’ Godfrey broke in, half laughing, half enraged, not really knowing which of them he was addressing.

‘Come on, gennelman,’ Mary yelled. ‘Come on. I wan’. I wan’.’

‘Whore of Babylon, bitch of unrighteousness,’ came the high-pitched furious old voice.

And then the sack burst open in the flurry of his feeble blows and Godfrey found both himself and Mary showered with pieces of dogs’ excrement, many-coloured and vile-smelling.

The deluge finally cooled Mary’s ardour. She flopped down on top of him, heavy, quivering with a sudden storm of laughter, sweat-smelling. He lay there under her, not knowing whether he wanted to be in some distant place or whether even this ridiculous indignity was not somehow sweet.

‘Oh God, gennelman,’ Mary said when she could speak for laughing. ‘Give the old sod some money, for Heaven-sake.’

Godfrey thought it might be wise to placate this quaveringly avenging demon. No doubt, in fact, he had been sent by the vengeful fly-paper man. But it was his place they were using, probably without permission or payment. And he had too split his old collecting sack and had had the painful acquisitions of perhaps a whole day and half the night go scattering everywhere. He groped for his clothes and money.

The little old man stood there, the tallow dip still waveringly alight in his hand, and continued to spit curses at Mary. She was ‘a pillar of iniquity’ and ‘a defiler of the holy’ as well as both ‘the scarlet whore of Rome’ and ‘the filthy whore of Babylon’.

But at last two half-crowns revealed themselves, the very last of his money beyond the sovereign he had set aside for

Mary.

'Here, please, we are very sorry,' he said, thrusting the coins towards the offended ancient.

The feeble smoky flame of the dip caught the shine of silver.

'Yes, yes,' said the old man, stretching out a horny crack-nailed hand.

He peered at what he had been given.

'Bless you, sir, bless you,' he said, turning at once to depart. 'Please go on with your business, kind sir. Do not be paying attention to old Jack. Fuck this black girl as much as you want, my sir. Pray do.'

But he felt altogether unable to avail himself of the invitation.

He had been plunging with Mary to depths he had never before felt, not even in his first down-swarming time-removed days with Lisa, not in any of the experiences he had embraced in the weeks when he had wandered through the deeps of London seizing with avidity on whatever presented itself until at last and suddenly his meeting with Sir Charles in the mountainous reaches of Lombard Street had wrenched him, torn roots open to the stinging day, up again to the world he had thought he had left.

He could not now resume that hurtling plunge. He got to his feet and began picking up his joyously discarded clothes.

But he knew that now he had finally left the world of order. He had left it a thousand times more decisively than when he had run out of the Opera to hurl himself into the ruleless delights of the Holborn Casino, more completely than when he had rushed from the unsuccessful too successful Venus Verticordia and had sought out Lisa only to find her gone. Now, in and with the Mary whom he had once run away from, had in later days rejected by some instinct that had made him delay this black baptism until he was

altogether ready for it, he had arrived at last at entire citizenship of the land without laws.

Now he knew, standing bent low in the little paper-strewn chamber struggling in the chill to get into his clothes, that he had abandoned totally the whole of that old upper side of life. He had made in the last quarter of an hour a departure real as stepping on board a clipper bound for Australia.

But was he—the idea jabbed at him suddenly and sharply — was he never in fact even going to see Elizabeth again, Elizabeth his lawfully wedded wife?

And his painting? Was he never to paint again? The Brocken Scene from *Faust*, was that never after all to take shape on canvas? And, if it was not, did not such a defection at once devalue, render empty and meaningless, everything else he had painted? The ‘Nuptials of Theseus and Hippolyta’, until a few weeks ago that had been the active centre of his life. The ‘Hermann and Dorothea’ and the others that had been so much praised, had the solemnly printed considered words of acclaim for them been totally wrong? The ‘Torquato Tasso Leaving the City of Ferrara’, was the Queen’s six hundred pounds for that mere waste of money? How strange. How strange that this should be.

And the people he had known all his life, known and loved, Lady Augusta, Sir Charles, so many others? Were they dead to him from tonight? Such a small break from the life in which they had played such parts. But a break, it seemed. A cutting off. A gap created.

‘Yo gonna buy me some supper, gennelman?’

He halted his fumble-fingered dressing and looked unseeingly at the big mulatto doing up with deft brown fingers a long row of buttons down the front of her dress. And then he found that he had come to a decision.

‘No, my dear,’ he said slowly. ‘No, I cannot stay to buy you supper. I must go just now. I find I shall have to go back home after all. For a little while.’

He would, after all, see Elizabeth. It was not possible simply to drop out of the world as if he were a pantomime actor and the stage-trap had opened beneath him. He would need, at its simplest, to take such a useful precaution as securing for himself as much money as he could.

So, stopping only to pay over his carefully guarded sovereign and to make a hasty rendezvous for the next evening, he left on what he thought of as a last pirating voyage out of the country of which he had just been made a freeman.

A freeman? Thrusting his way through the rookery's sharp-faced dwellers now being pushed on to the pavements as the seven big gin-palaces of Seven Dials closed their doors at last, he wondered whether 'freeman' was after all the right word. Oh yes, he had passed portals now that he had always wanted, whether he had known it or not, to break through. He was in the land. But were those portals not ones through which it was not possible ever to go back? Was he a freeman of this underworld or its slave? But it was a slavery in which he delighted.

It was perhaps because in the course of the next day he had begun to find that it was even more difficult to leave the land of rules and order than he had supposed that, when eight o'clock in the evening, his rendezvous hour with Mulatto Mary at the Whiffler gin-palace, came and went without her arriving, he was by no means downcast.

Nor did it take him long to hit on the reason for her absence. Plainly the fly-paper king's revenge was to be more prolonged than his mere sending of the little old paper-gatherer to interrupt them the night before. A couple of thick-necked bully boys would have been sent to Mary to warn her from St Giles. To thwart such a letch as he plainly possessed would be, in the greasy-coated king's eyes, an admirable punishment for impertinence.

But Mary's disappearance could not last for ever. Oh, whores were murdered. But they were murdered for good reason and all that Mary had done was to assist unwittingly in the insulting of the monarch. Banishment only was the reward for that, as the history books from Roman times onwards bore witness.

No, his deep-circling plunge with her in that little paper-strewn chamber had been a fat cheque taken out on the underside. Circumstances now were preventing him cashing it. But there was a bank that would not fail.

And besides more time to regulate his finances, to secure for himself the maximum sum in negotiable gold for the life that lay ahead, would be welcome. It had seemed when he had visited his stockbroker earlier in the day that at least a week or ten days would be necessary if matters were to be arranged to even reasonable advantage. Well, he would have them. He would live at home in exactly his usual way until the moment came. Then the trap in the stage-floor could be released in an instant. But until then everything would be as usual.

With one exception. Though he would live the life of the land of rules and arrangements to the letter, he could not betray the underside to which he now belonged body and soul in that one area where the frontiers of each territory so delicately touched. However long it proved that he had to stay at home he would not make love to Elizabeth.

Or, as he came to see within a few nights of this period, he would not allow her to make love to him.

After neither of them had made any move on one night and after on the next he had deliberately misinterpreted the way she had pressed against him under the layered blankets, on the third night Elizabeth, as was her way, brought the subject into the open.

'Godfrey,' she said, some moments after he had turned his back on her. 'Dearest, please.'

‘What— What is it?’ he said, feigning to be half-asleep and not to have understood. And knowing that the pretence would be useless.

‘Godfrey dearest, I want you.’

He did not answer for a little.

‘Dearest?’

‘Yes. Yes, I know, my dear.’

Once again he tried lying in silence in the darkness, which, since they never had a fire in the room unless one of them was ill, was very dense. He could hear the thin ticking of his watch on the table next to the bed. But there was no sound or movement from Elizabeth that might indicate she had abandoned her wait for his answer. Not the least creak from the mattress or noise from her almost-held breath.

‘Godfrey,’ she broke out at last. ‘What is it? I scarcely expected after so long to have to put forward my rights.’

‘Your rights?’ he said, startled.

‘Yes. Do I not have them as much as you?’

‘Why, yes, I suppose so. Yes, you must.’

But again he retreated into silence. And again she spoke.

‘Dearest, I must ask once more: what is wrong?’

He pushed himself up on one elbow and leant down looking towards the place where she lay.

‘My dear, I am sorry,’ he said. ‘But not now. Simply not. I cannot explain why. Except to say that, of course, it is no fault or blame of yours. But no, my dear, no.’

‘Very well.’

And she lay then in a silence equal to his.

He suspected it was a long time before she went to sleep. And he was awake to know. There were moments too, twice or three times, when he nearly broke his self-imposed vow and surrendered to the warm feminineness he could feel so near to him.

But instead he nurtured his plans. He added up imaginary sums, reckoned the value of shares, the advantages and disadvantages of each time for selling, whether a lot might not be gained by extending this period of truce. And at last he fell asleep.

So for that night it was avoided. And next day, fearing there would be a repetition of the same proceedings and knowing that, though Elizabeth had let her question go unanswered, she would not do so twice even in this difficult-to-speak-of domain he told her that he felt he ought to go down to Surrey for a few days since for the picture of the Brocken revels that he had now decided on some studies of pine trees would be essential.

She did nothing to oppose the idea. But her very readiness to acquiesce was a source of disquiet to him. He wondered if she did not know very well that he was making an excuse and was taking an all the firmer determination to tackle him when he returned. He wished he could make the supposed length of his expedition, which he had in the course of talking stretched to a full fortnight, cover the whole time till his departure. But his midnight calculations, borne out by daylight re-examination, had convinced him that he really ought to wait to sell a large holding of two-and-a-half per cent dated Treasury stocks till the New Year and between that and the present there lay their annual Christmas visit to the Bosworths in Wiltshire, something that could not be omitted without explanation.

He set out that afternoon with a well-filled valise, his sketching easel, a walking-stick and his bulky satchel of water-colour equipment by railway to Hazlemere and then on to Hindhead, to an inn visited on a similar expedition in his teens.

But his stay this time proved far different from the carefree visit he remembered, when he had spent every hour of long summer days drawing with immense facility

and enormously badly. Now, though he dutifully each day took his satchel and some paper with him, he felt no desire to draw. His art belonged to the world he had left, a ghost world now. Yet the world he ought to be inhabiting was by force of circumstances kept from him.

So he tramped each day disconsolately through the countryside, pleased rather than otherwise that the weather was cold and grey and miserable. And the full fortnight passed, all but the last day.

He almost decided that morning not to go out. But the comforts of the inn were sparse and after sitting for an hour in a lumpy chair in front of a too-small fire he took his satchel and set off. And, choosing paths he had hitherto not tried, he came suddenly upon a clump of pines every bit as twisted and tormented as his never-to-be-realised Brocken picture could possibly have wanted. Without thinking at all what he was doing, he sat himself on a convenient sandy bank and began to draw.

And he drew very well. One study in particular made his heart beat quicker and quicker as he saw what his pencil was doing. He was getting that pine, getting it to its last winter-darkened needle. In all its gnarled and reluctant shape you could yet feel the secret principle of growth striving outwards and upwards.

Then, as he touched in the last strokes, he realised what it was he had done. Like a jab it came to him that he had been betraying himself. Unthinkingly he had gone back to the enemy, had joined again the upward strivers.

Almost he ripped the sheet into shreds. But at the last moment a sort of duplicity warned him that the evidence of work done might be useful for Elizabeth, seldom though she asked to see how his work was going till he chose to invite her.

He rolled the stiff sheet into a cylinder, fastened it quickly into his satchel and set off, striding full out, to the inn. There

he brusquely ordered a gig, went up to his room, flung his clothes into his valise and departed. He was going to go back to St Giles. It was just possible that the fly-paper man's ban on Mary had ceased to be effective and he wanted her. He wanted her now more than ever. He wanted to cash that cheque on the deep-vaulted bank where he had established his account.

At Charing Cross he put his things into the Left Luggage Office and set off on foot. But he was not to reach St Giles that day. Before he had gone ten minutes on his way he met with one of those chance encounters between people otherwise distant as the poles that mark out the whirlpool life of London.

He was at the southern end of St Martin's Lane, making his way rapidly along, the fever of Mulatto Mary rising sharply in his veins, when about fifty yards further up just by a dyer's and scourer's he saw the figure of a woman that seemed acutely familiar and yet which he could swear was absolutely unknown to him.

He walked on, hurrying still but at the same time keeping his gaze fixed on the enigmatic shape ahead. She was a woman of the working classes, young or in early middle age, almost ludicrously over-burdened with a baby on one arm wrapped in the black shawl that went over her head, with a basket dangling from the arm that held this child and another child, a little boy of two or so, trailing from her other hand which was also clutching a bulging gingham umbrella.

Nothing unusual in such a sight. Was the disturbance he nevertheless felt due only to the fact of child-bearing being once again forced on his notice? No, that could hardly be. He and Elizabeth were divided for ever now. It no longer mattered whether she had a child or not. But there was something about that figure ahead ...

He was only some twenty paces from her, having been progressing at a much faster rate, when she turned in at

one of the passages leading to the courts off the street. And as she did so something, some turn of the body, some tiny idiosyncratic fashion of straightening the shoulders, something gave it to him on the instant. She was Lisa.

Chapter Twenty-Six

He had stopped still on the pavement, momentarily immobilised by his discovery. No wonder the figure ahead of him had seemed enigmatic. Lisa was to him no overburdened mother carrying her baby with another tot at her side. Lisa to him, for all that he had realised since that Derby Day more than three years ago that she must be married, was the very opposite of the picture she now presented. For him, indissolubly in his memory, she was a figure of whirlpool-deep allure. She was the luckily chanced-upon gateway that had at last led to the land of which he was now a citizen, just entering upon an inheritance that would last for ever.

For two or three seconds that were a long space in his mind he stood thinking furiously as if his life depended on his deciding whether to follow Lisa or not. Would it not be better simply to recognise that she was married, had children, lived no doubt in a house in the court she had just entered, was—how strange it seemed—a dweller now in the world of regularity, the world he had just left for ever? Or should he follow her, speak with her? If only just to wish her well? Yes, he owed her that much. And he had liked her too. Perhaps—she looked in poor circumstances—a gift would be proper?

He darted forward and turned into the court in time to catch sight of the door of one of the little houses there just closing. He went over to it and knocked.

In a moment the door was opened.

‘Yes?’ said the woman who stood there. ‘Yes?’ said Lisa. ‘Yes?’ said the mother of the two small children. ‘Yes?’ said a woman expecting nothing, unless it were trouble of a sort.

‘Lisa.’

The expression on her face changed with simple suddenness. Where before it had been a steady wary visage

set to receive whatever might come, now the old look of easy familiarity broke over it again with her smile. And the Lisa that once had been stood before him again. That old crookedy smile, the hooked blade-sharp nose, the quick intelligence.

‘Why, Mr Godfrey,’ she said. ‘Mr Godfrey of old. Step in. Won’t you step in?’

He walked in after her. The door opened straight into a room that was simple and bare but not altogether uncomfortable. There was a brisk fire in the range in the chimney, a clock cheerfully ticking on the mantel above, clean cotton curtains in the window and a table with a plush cloth over it.

‘Sit down, sit down,’ Lisa said. ‘Let me put babby in her cradle and young Joe will stay and play with her.’

Young Joe seemed more intent on staying and staring at the gentleman. But as soon as his earnest and undeviating regard had extracted a smile and a chuck under the chin—he wondered at himself—he submitted to being herded from the room in front of his mother and baby sister.

In their absence Godfrey looked round. The room, he saw, showed every sign of a modest prosperity. There was the clock and the curtains. The chair he was sitting in was comfortable. His boot-heels were sinking into a neat rag-rug before the fire. On the dresser on the far wall plates and pewter shone brightly. Evidently Lisa was by no means as poor as his first thoughts had painted her.

He smiled at his own unwillingness to believe she could be in easy circumstances other than by the exercise of her former profession. And at that moment she came back in.

‘Why,’ she said, ‘you’re smiling to yourself in quite your old way.’

‘Yes, I dare say I was.’

‘And what would you be smiling at? You used to smile at some queer things when you and I knew each other better.’

She was looking at him with her old teasingly provocative air. It sent his mind tumbling back to their days together. But in those days that look, what had it portended? Often as not some new piece of sexual ingenuity between them. She had looked like that when she had whispered obscenities in his ear. She had looked like that up into the cheval glass she had so carefully tilted over the bed in the rooms in Blue Cross Street.

He felt a little quiver of shocked propriety. She should not be looking at him in that way now.

Or should she? Did this mean that she was not after all the respectable married woman she purported to be? The spouse of the honest working carpenter? Was she in fact a side-time whore? Was this an invitation? With her own children in the house, the little boy likely at any time to come wandering in? Surely not. And yet ... Well, was that not something of the same piquancy that Lisa had excelled in before?

‘Come now,’ she said, looking at him challengingly, ‘a penny for your thoughts.’

‘A penny? As I recollect you used to have more from me than a penny.’

‘Sure, an’ I did. Five sovereigns’ worth of love was what I had. I remember it well.’

She was smiling frankly again, the impish smile of old. And he could not quite accept it.

‘But Lisa. But ...’

He gestured at the small signs of respectability all round, the clock, the curtains, the plush cloth on the table and, lastly, at the door left just ajar.

Lisa, quick as ever, read his unexpressed thought.

‘Ah,’ she said, ‘you’re thinking that a decent married woman with her childer about her shouldn’t be recalling the like of the things the pair of us did together. You’re

wondering am I as decent as I look, or am I making a little bit on the side, with or without the connivance of my Joey?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I was wondering all that.’

‘Well, Joey’s no conniver, I’ll tell you. And I’d be ashamed to deceive him too.’

‘And you’ve no need to make that little bit on the side,’ he chimed in. ‘You seem to be well off.’

Her sharp crookedy smile flashed.

‘Go on with you,’ she said. ‘You know well this room’s not a candle to the place I had in Blue Cross Street till just before I was wed. And do you think it’s champagne I drink of an evening now?’

‘Well, no, I suppose not. But do you ...?’

‘Oh, yes, there’s times I hanker for all that. But I’ve made my bed and I’ll lie on it. An’ I’ve a decent life ahead of me, if all goes any way right at all.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, I see that you have.’

He sat thinking about that life, and the life she had once led.

‘So,’ he said at last. ‘So you’ve settled for the top side after all, Lisa?’

‘The top side?’

‘Yes. For hoping to climb upwards, however slowly. For sticking to the rules everybody has made, more or less. For having one man and staying with him. For all that.’

‘Why, yes. I suppose that’s what I have done.’

Again he sat in silence, astonished.

‘Would you take a cup of tea?’ she said. ‘I’ll put the kettle on directly.’

‘No. No, thank you. I must be going. But it’s so strange to see you, Lisa. I looked for you once, you know. Took a cab to your old rooms, wanted you so much, was ready to live with you your sort of life. And you weren’t there.’

‘And when was this?’

She was smiling at him with lively curiosity.

‘Oh,’ he answered, ‘it was a good time ago now. It was before I was married. But you wouldn’t know that I am married, would you?’

‘So you’re married too and have settled for—what did you call it?—the top side?’

He gave a grunt of a laugh.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I thought I had done that. But I haven’t.’

‘Well, that’s for you to say.’

‘Yes. Yes, it is. And I’ve chosen my way, and I’m glad of it.’

He stood up. It was time to go. He and Lisa had nothing to say to each other now. They were from different worlds. And how curious it was that his should be the underside, hers the world of progress.

But he felt he could not simply walk abruptly out. He searched for something else to say.

‘And the Derby?’ he brought out at last. ‘I think I saw you at the Derby. It would have been three years ago, the year Chiaroscuro won at fifty to one. Was it you? Were you there?’

‘I was. Joey took me. I made him. We’d not been long wed then, and I’d always wanted to see the Derby. It was the great ambition of my life.’

‘I remember that. You told me so once. And I promised I’d take you.’

‘You did, I recall it well now. And when the time came you weren’t there and Joey was. So he took me, though I don’t think he much liked the notion.’

‘But didn’t he like it when you got there? He looked pleased enough when I saw him.’

‘Ah, he was. But that was because he had me, and well I knew it. But I think he came to like the Derby too before the day was done.’

Well, Godfrey thought, the two of us had the same experience then.

‘And you,’ he asked Lisa, ‘the day came up to your expectations?’

‘It did. It did indeed.’

‘But you’ve not been again since?’

He felt sure from the way she had talked that she had not.

‘No,’ she said. ‘The once was enough. I knew it then. I had it here.’

And she tapped with the taut fingers of each hand on either side of her narrow temples.

‘Well, I suppose you have,’ he said, thinking how odd she was and how confident of herself.

But he felt that he now could decently leave.

‘Well, I must be going,’ he said. ‘But let me— May I give you a little something? For the children?’

‘For the childer, I’ll take it,’ Lisa said.

And the words, simple though they were, struck him with force. For the children: it was the epitome somehow of that world above to which Lisa had so surprisingly given her allegiance. The money was to be no gift from man to woman for favours given, or even given in the past. It was to be a pledge to the future, to a better future.

But that, after all, to come from Lisa. From Lisa who had led him so straightforwardly into the underside world of which she had seemed to be a native-born citizen. From Lisa of the whisperings. From Lisa of the cheval-glass images. He could not endure that it should be so.

‘Lisa,’ he burst out, not thinking what he was to say, how he was to say it. ‘Lisa, it can’t be so. What about the past, Lisa? Those times in the past? What we did. You can’t have gone back on them all. You cannot.’

She smiled at him. That taunting crooked complicit smile of old. The smile of the caresses.

How could she?

‘And who’s to say I’ve gone back on anything at all?’ she answered. ‘It’s here, like I said about the Derby. Here whenever I want it.’

And once more she made that curious gesture of tapping at either side of her narrow forehead with her taut stretched fingers.

Then she gave him her hand to shake with easy familiarity. And then he was gone, was walking up St Martin’s Lane again as if he had paused only at the entrance to that court and had continued on to his destination.

But he knew from the moment he left Lisa’s door that he was not going to see the Seven Dials that day.

He felt that he had been given a hard lumpy mass of thought to hammer at. Perhaps it was the extraordinary reversal of their positions. But the more he thought the less he seemed to know what he ought to be thinking about. His mind obstinately presented him with memories that seemed to have no logical connection with the riddle this meeting with Lisa had brought—that extraordinary day at the Derby, Lisa and her Joey as he had first seen them at the masked ball in the Holborn Casino, Lisa stooping over him in the lane off Coventry Street, Mulatto Mary, Kitty, even Lady Augusta throwing herself so unexpectedly into those Derby revels.

So eventually, not without a mentally raised eyebrow at the inconsistencies of his own behaviour, he turned in the direction of the Charing Cross Station and his safely deposited respectable luggage.

There he would have the valise, the easel, the water-colours satchel and the walking stick put on top of a four-wheeler and would return sedately through the bustling streets to Red Lion Square. And he would greet Elizabeth and tell her, with a peck of a kiss on the cheek, that all had gone very well among the twisted pines of Surrey—and,

curiously, it had and there was a drawing in his satchel to show for it that once he would have been gloriously proud of—and thereafter there would come again the regular procession of well-cooked and neatly served meals, breakfast, luncheon, afternoon tea, dinner. And it would be again the bright and polished rooms where things had their places and were kept in them and were dusted there each morning.

And soon it would be Christmas. The walking advertisement men who came thickly on to the streets at this time of year were already much in evidence.

And at Christmas down in Wiltshire the warm and steady ritual would massively envelop them right from the flurry of departure at the railway station—but what an underpinnedly organised flurry—with porters in red-banded caps to bear off in due form the trunks, well bound in green upholsterer's velvet, the portmanteaux, the hatboxes, the baskets and the carpet-bags, with the ticket-collector in his cap bearing the proper three red bands to see them in due form on to the platform, with the silk-hatted station-master to supervise the whole, and the clang of the departure-bell exact to the minute. And waiting for them in the country would be the Bosworth carriage with cheerful stately old John on the box to greet them and take them through the well-ordered countryside and into the excellently kept park. And there would be Lady Augusta and Sir Charles and all their guests and meals to eat and often take two hours in the eating. There would be the parade of visits to neighbours at five and ten miles' distance with glasses of hot bishop to welcome them. There would be a shooting-party, and in one of the portmanteaux carefully packed would be his knickerbocker suit to wear for it and the short woollen drawers that went under it. There would be billiards in the billiards-room with the quiet exchanges of comments and solemn choosing of cue and rest, and his smoking jacket

would be packed to wear for that. There would be some jolly dancing in the hall with pretty girls in pretty gowns, and for that a portmanteau would contain his evening dress with its full and proper accompaniment of shirts and studs and cufflinks. And there would be holly branches hung on the walls, as there regularly were, and Sir Charles would put the Yule log on the fire on Christmas Eve as he always did. Then there would be the Christmas Day visit to church, with the Bosworth pews filled to the doors with the Bosworth guests, and carols to be sung and the curate's hand to be shaken afterwards and the sovereigns and half-sovereigns to be put in the poor-box. There would be the Christmas dinner, with goose and turkey, pork and baron of beef and the pudding that the servants had set to boil at four in the morning and the port and the punchbowl passing round all steaming.

But to him it would be fleeting and meaningless as the charades that they would play, as always, on Christmas evening.

And so it all happened.

The only event that did not occur as he had foreseen earlier was that Mulatto Mary did not appear again in St Giles before they left for Wiltshire. Things proved a little less simple than he had expected. It seemed he had not fully appreciated the sullen vengefulness of the fly-paper king: and there were not wanting hoarse confiding voices to confirm to him when he did go to St Giles that Mary had indeed been warned off and was under the ban still, to tell him and hold out dirty palms afterwards for reward.

But he was not unduly disconcerted. What did surprise him, however, was something quite different.

It was Elizabeth. He had come back from Hindhead considerably apprehensive that the explanation of his refusal to make love with her which she had begun to seek before he had left would within a night or two be pursued remorselessly to the end. And nothing had happened.

On the first night he had carefully prepared the ground with remarks about having walked miles down in Surrey that morning and how tired it had left him. And there had been no difficulties. They had gone to bed. He had blown out his bedside candle and at once turned over as if to sleep and that had been that. Much the same thing had happened the next night and he had not found it anything out of the way. But when on the following night and again the night after Elizabeth had still made no move towards him in face of his careful neutrality, then he did, lying there in the thick darkness, experience a decided sense of puzzlement.

All his tortuously prepared excuses abruptly looked the flimsy things they were. And he saw that, had Elizabeth been as determined as she had been when he had had to invent the idea of his sketching tour, they would not have lasted three minutes. But no excuses had been asked for. It was oddly upsetting.

And in the nights that followed, both at home and down in Wiltshire in the big old curtained fourposter that was provided for them, nothing was attempted and nothing was said. Gradually he came to take the unexpected amnesty for granted.

There were always, he told himself, so many possible explanations in this tricky territory. Perhaps Elizabeth was suffering from a phase of physical tiredness. She might even be a little ill, though she showed no other signs of that. There were a hundred and one possibilities. But he dared not put a single one of them to the test. Any hint at the subject might in a moment rouse Elizabeth's sleeping perspicacity.

In the meantime, back home after Christmas, there were shares to be sold quietly at the best price and stock not to be sold till New Year's Day had come. There were assets to be realised. There were preparations to make, sums of gold to be taken to out-of-the-way deposit boxes and gradually

accumulated. And on New Year's Day itself he would be able to receive over the brass-edged counter of that immutable institution in Lombard Street, where he had once so unexpectedly encountered Sir Charles and had been haled away to the Derby, the last substantial sum in sovereigns.

New Year's Day would do it. Then it would only be a matter of finding Mulatto Mary again, of waiting for her return from wherever she was now making her living in her trade, Chatham perhaps among the sailors or Aldershot with the soldiers. In time she would come quietly back to St Giles and the West End, exercising caution, avoiding a cut face or bruised body. But she would come.

But before New Year's Day there came New Year's Eve. And the breakfast table in Red Lion Square on the last day of the year found Elizabeth, by contrast with the slight withdrawnness she had seemed to show ever since he had returned from Hindhead, in a mood of something like sentimentality. It was a time, she declared, for looking back. How long ago it was, she said, since her famous impulsive letter to him hoping to soften something of the blow she had dealt with her comparison of paint-brushes and scrubbing-brushes. And that day in the Park when he had championed her over her desire to do something useful in the world, did he remember that?

He remembered. The coaches of the Four-in-Hand Club, a pair of English-apple equestriennes. But there had been that other park scene not so long ago and a creature who had come out of the fog and set his feet suddenly on the sliding path that he had always without knowing it been destined to take.

'Dearest, don't you remember?'

His secret thoughts had stopped him giving her the acknowledgement her reminiscence had demanded.

'My dear, am I likely ever to forget?' he said hastily. 'To forget that, or all the things that sprang from it. The way

you bearded the Bishop. Why, I even remember quite half of that interminable lecture we were given by Arthur Balneal that day.'

He wished instantly that he had not let his guilty desire to make recompense rush him into mentioning Balneal. The Celebrated Investigator and his unexpected appearance in the heart of St Giles was something he wanted to forget. And now Elizabeth might start some gentle mockery of him. She seldom resisted the opportunity.

But on this occasion she was not roused. Instead rather abruptly, almost as if it was she who ought to shy from the name Balneal, she put a request to him.

'Dearest, tonight, if you go out, will you be back in good time?'

'In good time?'

'Before midnight, dearest. I should like to drink a toast with you then to the year to come.'

The year to come. If he could perhaps find Mulatto Mary tonight, there would be a year of only half a day to come. Once visit the bank tomorrow and the stage-trap could open beneath him and the lights be left to shine on vacancy for ever more.

If he could find Mary.

And, quite suddenly, he guessed where she might well be. The turning of the year, it was a time for looking back as Elizabeth had just been looking back. And was it not a time for going back too? For going back to one's place of origin. And had he not heard from the lips of that knowing hot-eel boy he had given his sixpences to that Mary had been born somewhere near the Globe and Pigeons beerhouse in Rotherhithe and that she came back there 'like a pigeon 'erself'?

So was it not likely, likely in the extreme, that she would for this night have come cautiously back at least that near the centre of the metropolis? He would go and see. He

would go and see as soon as ever it got dark and Mary was likely to be at the Pigeons.

‘My dear? My dear, will you?’

Elizabeth was pressing her question.

What was it? Ah, yes.

‘Yes, my dear one. I do have to go out tonight, but I shall be back before midnight. To drink your health.’

‘Godfrey, do you promise?’

She was leaning forward across the table—its array of delicate china, its plate of muffins gently steaming—and looking at him intently. Why should this little innovation in their lives mean so much to her? But no point in wondering now. That life was nearly over.

‘Yes, my dear, of course I promise. I promise solemnly.’

Rotherhithe and an evening of gloom and sullen cold. Darkness had seemed to fall as early as three o’clock that afternoon and it had been impossible to read anywhere in the house except by lamplight. Elizabeth had returned early from Perkins Rents, unable to see what was clean and what dirty. And, as soon as their earlier-than-usual tea was finished, he had left, repeating once more his perfunctory promise to be home in time to drink to the year to come at midnight. He had thought, stepping out into the square with the elegant twig-fall of its leafless plane-trees almost invisible against the lowering grey sky, that it was bound to snow before long. And, as his cab had crossed London Bridge, thick slushy flakes had indeed begun to fall, sliding downwards past the big globes of the bridge lamps like little ghosts.

It will not lie, he had thought. Within minutes it will be converted to miry sludge, yellow first then sooty grey.

But for a few minutes, however, as it had landed on the roofs of the houses of Tooley Street it had been white and magical. And he had remembered with a sharp twist of irony

the snow of his wedding day, that unseasonable sudden carpet of pure magic. He had seen it then, as it had echoed his feelings, as marking a newer purer finer world for him. But it must have melted almost as soon as their train had reached Dover to reveal the ordinary grime of the streets and as well the waiting pockets of a deeper richer dirt.

He told the cab-driver as he had done the last time he had come to Rotherhithe to stop at St Paul's Church. And from there he set off for the Globe and Pigeons, surer this time of the way and making better speed, past the tall board-clad shape and red-curtained windows of the rival Stump and Magpie, tracing back the way he had walked beside the bullseye-carrying policeman and his river-sodden charge, over the swing bridge between the two docks, catching a whiff of timber smell from a half-unloaded vessel even in the cold, and round the looming shape of the boat-yard. Under his tramping feet, as he had forecast, the snow was turning already to slush and mingling with the pervasive black mud.

Then at last he was at the destination he had failed to reach before, and a wretched hovel of a place that much thought about Globe and Pigeons proved, with one sprawled fellow in a blue guernsey lying flat on his face dead drunk just outside and another in a sailor's jacket propped up against the wall with a sealskin cap jammed over his face. But there was light inside and the sound of laughing and singing.

He pushed at the gap-planked door and entered.

And she was there.

Mulatto Mary was there, sitting up on a long rough-wood table, wearing that same gaudy green dress she had had on at St Giles, swinging her legs—on her broad feet under the remarkably fine ankles were a pair of bright-red brass-heeled shoes appallingly scuffed—holding a pewter mug in

her right hand, embracing with her other arm the neck of a big dirt-grimed coalwhipper sprawling in front of her.

And the moment she saw him—in the doorway he must have stood out in that low lamplit place like a piece of glass among pebbles, for all that he had dressed as roughly as he could— she took her arm off the huge-shouldered fellow gazing drunk-enly up at her, gave him a light push, bounced down from her perch on the table and walked straight over to him.

‘Hello, gennelman,’ she said. ‘I s’pose yo ain’t lookin’ fo’ me?’

‘I am,’ he answered. ‘I’ve been looking ever since we saw each other last. But I knew I would find you in the end. There’s some business unfinished between us.’

‘There is, gennelman, there is.’

She put back her broad bronze face, opened her great white-teethed mouth and laughed like the pealing of the bells that at midnight that night would ring out the old, ring in the new. She laughed till the whole of her well-fleshed frame shook from head to foot.

Then she put one stout arm on his shoulder and swung him round to face the door.

‘Yo come along o’ me,’ she said. ‘I got a place to go. ’S not much of a place, mind. It’s dirty, gennelman, and it stink. But it’s maybe the sweeter fo’ that. Maybe all the sweeter fo’ that.’

And they went out into the dark and the cold of the night, where the last of the snow had ceased to fall though the slush lay icy and soaking to their feet. She led him into a maze of lanes, often so narrow that baulks of timber stretched right across keeping the decaying houses from falling on to one another. They went round a dozen corners at least and passed as many stinking pockets of blackness and negotiated half a dozen passageways so straitened that they could no longer walk side by side. And in all the time

there was hardly a light to see by. But she guided him with a hand on his shoulder and he left himself totally in her care.

He did not know quite for how long they walked. It might have been as little as ten minutes only; it might have been for twice as long. But eventually Mary stopped at one of the houses in a lane that seemed from the glimpses of sky he got where there should have been solid walls to be quite deserted and falling into ruin. He saw now, standing beside her, that there were not even rag-stuffed windows here as there had been in the houses they had passed earlier. Instead there were only gaping holes with the frames long ago ripped out for firewood, and beyond the black holes it was just possible to make out walls that were more bare laths than plaster.

Mary pushed at the door in front of her and it gave way with a slow creak. She took his hand then and, though they had seen not a soul for the past five minutes and more, she whispered.

‘This is the house where I was born, lily gennelman. Come in along o’ me. Come in.’

He followed her in blindly. In the pitch dark he could smell cold and rot and perhaps the high stink of rats’ droppings. But he could also smell in chance wafts the big bronze body ahead of him, the musky odour that he remembered.

He stumbled up a few stone steps, feeling the soft and tackily clinging contact of spiders’ webs thick against his face. They went through a doorless doorway. And then she came to a halt in front of him.

‘Wait a minute, gennelman,’ she said. ‘Wait a minute an’ yo’ll see where yo are. There’s a window here and the light’ll come through in jus’ a minute.’

He waited in the darkness, leaning lightly against her, feeling the strong warmth of her body, of her shoulder and of her wide hips. And before long he was able to make out the paler rectangle of the window.

He took a step towards it.

‘Careful where yo go, gennelman,’ Mary said. ‘There’s a hole there, a hole where we used to shit into the creek.’

He stopped and looked downwards and in a moment he was able to make out a lighter circle in the darkness at his feet. And then through it he saw a flickering dim bluish light coming and going. He must be seeing, he thought, the phosphorescent remains of rotting fish or will-o’-the-wisp gas rising from the decaying matter in the creek.

But Mary had stepped up beside him. She turned him towards her and took him in her capacious arms. He felt her body braced against his. He felt the soft warmth of her great breasts, the hardness of her round stomach and a harder hardness below that, thrusting at him.

He reached forward and pulled up the skirt of that garish green dress till he felt the crisp layer of mud round the hem. And then his hands fell to their work.

It was sweet as she had promised. It was sweeter than anything that had ever been. It was sweeter for the sharp whiffs of decay that floated up from the black creek underneath. It was sweeter for the filth that lay sticky to the touch on the boards under them as they rolled and wrestled, kissed and caressed. It was sweeter for the rats that ran to and fro and squeaked as if the heady scent of wildness responding to wildness had infected them too.

It was the promise amply redeemed. And in it the last hints of dissatisfaction in response to the question he had put so many times in so many different circumstances paled away at last. This was the end. The answer, the ultimate answer.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

But they did not lie, as he had thought they would, all night on the slime-black boards of the house where Mary had been born. He had fallen into a doze of exhaustion and then the cold had woken him and, shivering and taking in at every breath the steady stench of the foul creek below, he had thought that he must have some spirits or he would contract a disease that might be the end of him. So they had got up and stumbled through the cobwebby darkness of the ruinous house and out into the mean little forsaken street. At the Globe and Pigeons they had taken each of them two threepennyworths of poor rum, swallowing them neat.

‘Will yo come back to the house, gennelman?’ Mary asked.

‘I’ll come back to you. But not tonight now. I’ve a little business to transact tomorrow. But when it’s done I’ll come back. I’ll come and I’ll stay. With you. Perhaps with others. But here I’ll spend my life.’

Mary looked at him with a slow smile on her broad bronze face. And he saw that she knew that ‘here’ did not mean Rotherhithe or the rotting remains of the house where she had been born. She knew, without telling, that ‘here’ was the underside, that boundaryless land that lay all about them and would lie all about them both so long as they lived. So the rendezvous they made for this particular place at six o’clock next day, New Year’s Day, was a rendezvous only in the most practical terms. Because already Godfrey had taken up residence. Already he had entered upon his kingdom. The doors of that other upper world had clanged closed behind him.

The doors had closed behind him. But, he found, there was still a little to be done on the far side of them. It would be

necessary to slip through a wicket-gate. There were his financial transactions to be completed. There were perhaps some clothes and other things to be got from home. And, he realised as his cab came carefully over the slushy roadway into Red Lion Square and he looked at his watch, there was his midnight appointment with Elizabeth to be kept.

He could have avoided the mockery, have waited outside till the clocks had struck the hour and the bells had begun to ring. But she would stay up and wait for him and there would be explanations to undergo. It was best to go through with it. There should be time still to creep into the house and if possible get upstairs to his dressing-room and change from his filthy clothes into ones that would excite no remark. Then to that ashy toast to a year of half a day.

He told the cab-driver to set him down on the far side of the square so that the too-near clop of hooves would not draw attention to his arrival. Then he walked quietly across the centre of the square under the tall dripping planes, crept up the house steps, slid his latch-key into the lock with the greatest caution and opened the door just an inch or so. The hall was empty, standing all in quiet order. He went in on tip-toe. Then he saw, with a spurt of quite unjustified anger, that the door to the drawing-room was open by just a crack and that there was a light coming from behind it.

For a little he stood on the thick doormat hesitating. It would be Elizabeth in there. Doubtless the maids had been sent to bed. Elizabeth, a believer in plenty of health-giving sleep, never kept them up unnecessarily late. So would she see him if he tried to creep past? Or should he go in and face her in clothes that plainly stank of the filth he had been rolling in? That would certainly lead to requests for explanation. Elizabeth was constitutionally incapable of not noticing dirt. But if he set off to get upstairs and was seen? The consequences then would be all those recriminations he was seeking to avoid.

He decided to risk going straight up. He set out across the polish-glistening rug-spread floor. There came not the faintest sound of any movement from the drawing-room. No doubt Elizabeth was sitting quietly by the fire, a fat Blue Book on her reading-stand. He reached the stairs and went up them as fast as he dared without making any creaks. Only, just at the turn, did it seem to him that the crack of light below looked less bright than it had done, as if perhaps the door had been opened and then pushed to again. But there was no time to stop and make sure. He whisked into the dressing-room, trusting that his half-seen glimpse had been a mere trick of the light.

It did not take him very long to bundle most of his clothes out of sight, find fresh ones and put them on. Then he pomaded his hair liberally in the hope that the scent would cover up any remaining odours from Rotherhithe and crept quickly down the stairs again, holding hat and surtout.

The crack at the edge of the drawing-room door looked not a whit narrower than before. He slipped across to the house-door, opened it and then closed it again with something of a bang.

‘Halloa, my dear,’ he called out. ‘Not yet midnight.’

Elizabeth appeared at the drawing-room door.

‘My darling,’ she said. ‘No, it wants five minutes to the hour.’

She had an air of excitement about her. Almost a child’s excitement, he thought. It would have been cruel to have deprived her of the innocent pleasure she had been looking forward to, even though a greater cruelty was to come.

He finished hanging up the hat and surtout he had clandestinely brought down and then went to go into the drawing-room.

‘No, my darling,’ Elizabeth said. ‘I have had a fire lit upstairs and the wine put out beside it.’

Standing to let her precede him up the stairs, he felt somewhat disconcerted. A fire in the bedroom. They never had one except in case of illness. It was a luxury Elizabeth strongly disapproved of, preferring plenty of fresh air. But perhaps the cold of the day had made her for once change her mind, though in other wintry spells she had never done so.

He followed her up.

In the bedroom there was no other light but that of the fire, burning clearly and briskly. Shadows were leaping over the walls, altogether changing the aspect of the room. No longer was its mood set by the pattern of small flowers on the white of the walls, which he had been accustomed to think of as bright Alpine sprigs taking him back to the days of their Swiss honeymoon. Instead the room had become a half-and-half place, half its old open self, half newly mysterious. And was there not something else, beside the wine and glasses on the little table by the fire, that was different? Yes, the bed. The bedclothes had been turned down much further than usual. Perhaps with the fire Edith, whose duty it was to prepare the bed at night, had departed from her usual practice. But it was odd. And it added to the uneasiness he felt. Or was that his conscience, pricking him for the deceit he was about to play?

And almost at once the deceit had to be played. From outside in the cold still air came the sound of the church clocks beating out the first of the twelve strokes of midnight. It was the end of the old year. It was the start of the new.

Elizabeth had poured the wine while he had been standing musing. They took their glasses. They lifted them. They drank.

‘Happy New Year,’ he said. And the words choked him a little.

‘Happy New Year, my darling,’ said Elizabeth.

And her words seemed to carry more meaning, and even a more immediate meaning, than they might have done.

She drank down the rest of her wine almost at a single swallow. And again he experienced a slight shock of surprise. Elizabeth, who would take wine only occasionally and then make a single glass last the whole of a dinner hour, to have tossed this glass down now? Yes, that was what she had done. Tossed it down.

'My dear, more wine?' he asked, as the bells outside began their cheerful ringing.

'No, my darling, my darling dear. I've had all the wine I need.'

And at once she moved to her dressing-table and began to take off her clothes. And another oddity. She, who was always so careful of her things, folding them neatly and putting them precisely down, now she was dropping them on to the chair so hastily that they were in danger of sliding to the floor. And, more, she had made no move to get her warm nightdress but one by one was taking each garment off so that before long she would be naked. Dress, stays, cambric petticoat, flannel petticoat, stockings, drawers, chemise, each in turn dropped hastily on to the chair. In summer occasionally she would undress completely and not scruple to stand naked before him. But in winter mere comfort dictated otherwise. Of course, tonight there was the fire, but ...

Then he saw it. In summer when she undressed completely it was always as a preliminary to making love.

So she had not acquiesced, as he had come to think she had, at his own failure to make advances to her. Instead, plainly, she had planned this play-acting scene. This was why he had been made, with such insistence, to promise to return home at a reasonable hour. He had often in the last weeks taken the precaution of coming back very late precisely so as to evade the possibility he wanted so

strongly to avoid. But now he had been tricked. And this too was the reason for the fire. And the too-deeply-turned-down bedclothes. She had decided, in that direct sea-cutting way of hers that had once so enchanted him, that she was going to seduce him. And she had bided her time and now was attacking him boldly as once she had attacked the Bishop of Stanmore.

She was loosening her dark hair now to the all-around-them chiming of the bells outside. The firelight was leaping on the white skin of her body, playing over the deep pink of the marks her stays had left.

What was he to do? Was he to resist her? Was he to succumb to her perhaps? It would be a deception to let her think she had brought him back to her again. But would it be so much worse a deception than the deception he was already practising, the deception that would be put finally into effect next day? No. But it would be, he felt with total conviction, a gross deception practised against his new faith. It would be, on the very day that he had declared that the gates had clanged shut, a traitorous act to link himself with one who was surely the very opposite of the dwellers in his new country.

He would not do it.

But Elizabeth was coming towards him, holding out her arms.

‘My dear,’ he stammered out to her. ‘My dear, I am sorry. But I cannot— An intense headache. I don’t know what, but, Elizabeth, I’m sorry, I cannot.’

He had hoped that she would be checked by this. But if she were not to be, then he had expected her to plead with him. What she did do, however, took him altogether by surprise.

She darted close to him and with the firelight dancing on her nakedness and smiling, smiling, he would have thought

of anyone else, lasciviously, she began trying to take off his clothes.

‘My dear, no. No, dearest.’

‘Let me see you, Godfrey.’

She was crooning at him, crooning as the churchbells rang out. Yes, she was behaving as whores had behaved with him, some of the whores he had gone to in the days between the failure of the Venus Verticordia and the visit to the Derby. They had not been those plunged in the underside but rather the honest journeymen of their trade, giving the customer what they supposed he wanted. They had behaved in almost exactly the way Elizabeth was behaving now.

She had stepped back from him and was flaunting her body at him. They too had flaunted their bodies. As they had done, she was swaying towards him and away, now with out-thrust breasts, now with buttocks, now with crisp curly-haired motte.

It had been in those terms that he had thought of such whores. But Elizabeth. Elizabeth. Elizabeth of the love-making that, however ardent, had been always flower-pure. Elizabeth, darting now to the bed and flinging back the covers she had already half stripped off. Elizabeth turning and wantonly challenging him, challenging him to sexual encounter with all the directness with which she would challenge some dirt-grimed wife at Perkins Rents to clean her squalid home. It was unbelievable.

It was wrong.

In an instant, the thought clarifying itself in his mind, he had his dilemma solved for him. He could no more bring himself to make love to this creature than he could have made love to an iron machine.

‘No, Elizabeth, no,’ he cried. ‘This must not be.’

And it checked her. Standing beside the broad-spread bed that she had intended should be the field of their encounter,

he saw her quail once and shrink.

‘My dear,’ he said, less stridently. ‘This cannot be. My dear, I am going to lie down to sleep, and I advise you to collect yourself and then do the same.’

He sought out his nightshirt from where Elizabeth had tossed it aside, pulled off his top clothes and slipped its voluminous folds over his head. Then, with almost surreptitious haste, he took off the rest of his clothes, buttoned the nightshirt high to the neck, hauled back the covers over the bed and slipped between the sheets. He turned his face to the wall and shut his eyes.

He did not of course sleep. Too much had happened, too much that was too unexpected, too much that ought to be thought about and would not let itself be thought about. So he lay there, in the slightly crouching back-turned attitude in which he had first placed himself. He lay stiffly and the New Year peal rang out its course.

After a long while he heard her move. There had been little sound in the room now the bells had stopped, only the tiny ticking of his watch and the occasional soft settling of the fire in the grate, and his ears were attuned for the least noise. She moved. He heard her walk across the room. There was a minute sigh and the sound of fine material being whisked through the air and against a body. She in her turn was putting on her nightdress. Then he heard her steps again, for all that the carpet was thick. And then, as he had expected, there was the movement of the mattress as she rested for a moment on the edge of the bed. And then she swung herself up and pulled the blankets over herself.

And then she was lying beside him, as far away as she could get, and—it was easy to tell by the complete lack of sound—she was as rigid as if she was the statue of an armoured and stiff-legged knight carved on a tomb. He opened his eyes. The fire had almost died to nothing.

Perhaps half an hour passed. He once or twice wondered whether he should try to make himself sleep. But he knew that he would be unable to do so. For a little he sorted out the mere mechanical events that must have led up to the situation. How, undoubtedly, Arthur Balneal had after all seen him in St Giles that night he had come back enraged and disappointed from Rotherhithe. He must have been seen going into the house at the far end of the alley and the gust of laughter he had heard had been because of that. Balneal must have waited too to see him come out and have noted that he was in the company of the fly-paper man. And he would not have found it hard to learn of that individual's pandering activities and the sort of women he led his customers to. In what manner Balneal had managed to tell Elizabeth of it all defied conjecture, what 'soiled doves' had been referred to and what 'unspeakable practices'. But to tell her he had evidently conceived it his duty. And tell her he had. And Elizabeth? For once she must have decided not to bring things immediately out into the open. Most probably Balneal had come to see her when he himself had been at Hindhead. So she would have had time to think and think it all over. No wonder she had seemed withdrawn when he had come back from Surrey and no wonder she had checked at Balneal's name this morning. And then at some time she must have conceived this notion that she would have to be to him what she thought the women he frequented must be, the women she knew he had in those days before the Derby been drawn to in preference to herself.

So had she studied whoring? With all the concentration she brought to a Blue Book? In some way or other she might well have done. A person of resolution, and no one had more of that than Elizabeth, could have got hold of books, have sent some bleary messenger from Perkins Rents to Holywell Street, to the erotic booksellers, and have gained

thus some book-learned idea of the whore's mode of business. And then she would have laid her plans for New Year's Eve and sprung her pathetic, her appalling trap.

It did not bear thinking of. And he could not think any further about what it all meant. He lay in the dark with his mind worn blank.

And then he heard a sound. For a second or two he was at a loss to account for it, though he knew it was coming from Elizabeth. Then he realised. She was weeping. But it was no noisy and desperate weeping. It was a quiet weeping more terrible than any rending sobs.

And she wept on and on. He could not believe that anyone could sustain such an agony of spirit for so long. But the thin wail of utter misery continued and continued.

Till at last he reached a hand backwards and found her. The wailing hardly changed then. But it did change. It took on a tiny different note that told him that his hand on her side had been felt and was affecting her.

He rolled over under the thick layers of the blankets. He put his arm round her. His hand came in contact with her bosom through the soft material of her nightdress.

'My dear,' he whispered. 'Don't cry. Don't cry like that. My darling. My love.'

And then he began to do what he had vowed to himself little more than an hour earlier that he would never do. He began to make love to her. He had said to himself then that it would be a traitorous act against his new country, and now he let compassion allow him to make that betrayal.

For many minutes she did not respond. Yet neither did she in any way repulse him. He knew that she wanted him to continue and he continued. And then eventually she did begin to respond. And soon they were kissing and caressing each other in the way they had made love so many scores of times in their married life together.

And then ... And then ... Then, little by little, but surely and certainly as letters written in black ink on a white page, she began to go on from the caresses there had always been between them to new caresses. Carefully, feeling her way under the dark of the blankets, she went further, to little new things and to greater ones. Step by step, each step felt out, explored and made safe in the enfolding darkness, she went on until at last the two of them were sharing and exchanging devices of love as daring and as poundingly all-consuming as any that he had shared with Lisa or with Mulatto Mary in the most untrammelled moments of their comings-together. Gone under the covering darkness was the commercial harlot that Elizabeth had tried to be with such pathetic lack of success. Gone. Vanished as if she had never been. And in the darkness there had come instead, from deep deep down, the woman who could.

Thoughts tumbled through his head, more dream visions than coherent ideas. His painting, his picture of the haggish Brocken revels, came there, complete as it would one day be. And there came vision memories of that day at the Derby, almost as if they too were a painting but a painting in time lasting all one long day, the wild and out-of-the-world mingling of the fine and the foul, the upwards striving and the mire beneath joined in one. And he saw, too, suddenly the girl-boy imp of Greenwich, that once inexplicable child who had seemed to delight in the mud she had plunged into head first. And Lisa he saw, last and almost strangest of all. But not the Lisa he had first known, the Lisa of the underside. No, instead he saw the Lisa of not so many days ago, tapping with the stretched fingers of either hand on the sides of her head and saying over and over again 'It's here. Here whenever I want it.'

But soon anything even as faintly seizable as these mind-pictures vanished amid the swirling, whirling, deep-

plunging, light-spinning, colour-roaring charges that stormed through him and through him. Soon there was the mighty peak and the depths it rested on.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It was on the last day of January, in the evening after they had had dinner and while they were installed on either side of the familiar fire, with outside a boisterous tugging wind sending the street-lamps rattling and flinging from time to time sharp scatters of hailstones against the fragile skin of the windows, that Elizabeth spoke to him.

She looked up from the newest textbook of hygiene that had arrived that day, glanced at the clock which showed just nine, turned to the door as if to make sure that neither of the maids was likely to come in and then softly pronounced his name.

‘Godfrey.’

He lowered the newspaper he had been half-reading while his thoughts were on his swiftly progressing underpainting for ‘The Revels on the Brocken’. Then, seeing her, his heart contracted suddenly, awesomely. He knew what she was going to say.

‘Yes, my dearest one? Yes?’

‘Godfrey, you know.’

‘Yes. Yes, I do know. We are going to have a child, my darling. Isn’t that it? It is that, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. Yes, it is, my darling one. You and I are going to have a child. The child of our love.’

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